

+TALKING POINTS



BURNSVILLE

1,614

POPULATION

35 miles

DISTANCE TO ASHEVILLE

43 miles

DISTANCE TO
JOHNSON CITY, TENN.

6,684 feet

ELEVATION OF
MOUNT MITCHELL

18,470

POPULATION OF YANCEY
COUNTY IN 2020 CENSUS

652

NET GAIN IN COUNTY'S
POPULATION FROM 2010,
A 3.7% INCREASE.Old Timey
Days

ANNUAL FALL FESTIVAL

\$37,476

MEDIAN SALARY IN 2020

HIGH TIMES

Mountainous Burnsville and Yancey County catch the eyes of tourists, industry and broadband enthusiasts.



▲ Downtown Burnsville

BY BRYAN MIMS

About 400 miles away from where his bones rest inside a marble vault beneath live oaks, the daring sea captain fixes his flinty gaze toward the sunset. His back is turned toward the distant sea that enriched him and the coastal constituency that rebuffed him.

Otway Burns, with streaks of green running down his copper legs, holds a bugle in his left hand and a sword in his right. "Sailor-soldier-statesman," reads the plaque on his granite perch. "He guarded well the seas, let our mountains honor him."

Burns was a naval hero in the War of 1812 when he commanded a clipper called the Snap Dragon. As a privateer, he captained three cruises and seized more than 40 British boats from Nova Scotia to the Bahamas, raiding them of booty worth millions of dollars.

Years after the war, Burns served in the North Carolina legislature, representing Carteret County along the coast. But voters kicked him out of office when he supported efforts to give western North Carolina more influence in the General Assembly. In 1833, he made the tie-breaking vote to allow for the formation of new counties in the mountains, including Yancey. A year later, local landowner John Bailey donated 100 acres for the county seat, insisting that it bear the name Burnsville in his honor.

The statue of the seafarer is the centerpiece of the Burnsville town square, a village green with brick walkways, benches and stately trees.

Across the street is the Garden Deli, its veranda veiled in shrubs, flowers and vines. At the Snap Dragon bar, an offshoot of the deli, guests can nurse a Capt. Burns Bloody Mary while drinking in the decor of fishing nets and a ship's wheel — unlikely maritime furnishings for a bar deep in the Carolina mountains.

No longer dry

Burnsville, with a population of fewer than 2,000, had been a dry town until 2010, when the citizens voted to allow alcohol sales. Yancey County, outside town limits, remains dry. The Garden

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAM DEAN



▲ John Silver started Homeplace Beer in 2017.

Deli's owner, Greg Yuziuk, now had an opportunity to complement the deli with a bar, and the town's namesake inspired him to build it with a nautical theme. He opened Snap Dragon in 2015. "I wanted a nice place like you would see in an airport and isn't a honky tonk and has fine food."

A couple of years later, Burnsville native John Silver slaked his own thirst for beer in this once-dry town. He honed his craft at breweries in the Asheville area before returning to Burnsville to launch Homeplace Beer Co. in 2017. The place outgrew its original home, and in February 2020 Silver opened a brewery and taphouse in a three-story brick building on West Main Street.

His farm-to-pint beers use ingredients produced in Yancey County. The Brown Mule English Brown Ale, for example, is brewed with honey from local beekeepers. On a sprawling lawn outside the brewery, people sit and sip at picnic tables shaded by red umbrellas; rocking and Adirondack chairs cluster around a fire pit.

"If Burnsville was gonna have a brewery, it would be a lot easier to succeed if it was opened by someone who was a native," says Silver, 41. "We're just that kind of town. We got a lot of good, local support early on from the people I knew and grew up with."

Mountain getaway

Come October, Silver's hometown is aflame in color. The Black Mountains, looming like ramparts to the south, erupt into crimson and lemon and orange, seducing carloads of leaf lookers. Mount Mitchell, thrusting 6,684 feet — the highest mountain in eastern America — scrapes the sky a few miles from the town square.

Located about 35 miles northeast of Asheville, Burnsville is an antidote to the eclectic city's crowds and energy, an easy-to-reach refuge since U.S. 19E was widened in recent years to four lanes through Yancey County. Now Burnsville is linked to Interstate 26 and Asheville with a multilane highway.

In the past year and a half, tourist spending has nearly tripled in the county, according to Christy Jones, executive director of the Burnsville-Yancey Chamber of Commerce. She says the pandemic likely played a role. "People are looking for a place to get away from a lot of other people," she says. "They're looking to get outside of the cities and find a place where they can safely have a vacation. And we used all that excess funding that we got to drive

our marketing."

Burnsville delivers on rustic accommodations. Overlooking the town square, Nu Wray Inn beckons with its long line of rocking chairs on the front porch, its creaky wooden floors topped with oval, braided rugs, and its communal parlors with antique furniture. The Nu Wray dates back to 1833, making it older than the town itself.

The inn expanded over the years to become a three-story, clapboard Colonial with 26 guest rooms, though only 14 are available for rent. In 2014, two couples bought the Nu Wray: Joey and



▲ The eastern United States' highest peak is near the Blue Ridge Parkway and about 35 miles from Burnsville.

Jill Farmer, along with Joey's cousin, Eric Wilson, and his wife, Christy. The couples had experience in the hospitality business, owning the Cabins at Asheville in Candler. When they learned this historic inn was on the market, they saw a place perfect for weddings and special events.

"We just fell in love with the town and the people," Jill says. "Every year — and we've had it for seven years — it seems to get a little busier."



▲ Artists Nathan Favors and Kristen Page of Page Pottery.



Curtain call

An overnight stay in Burnsville might include taking in a play at the Parkway Playhouse, the oldest continually operating summer theater in North Carolina. Founded in 1947 by a drama professor, the independent theater company hosts musicals, comedies and plays from May through October. The pandemic halted performances last year, and 90% of revenue disappeared. But the shows are back, albeit with limited capacity and mask mandates. For October, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” takes the mainstage.

This Saturday afternoon, the big red building is locked and no shows are scheduled. Amid a sudden thunderstorm, theater volunteer Jerry d’Aquin, 77, gets drenched while clearing weeds and scrap wood on the building’s perimeter. “We decided that we should give the old place a haircut and spiff it up and do all the things that haven’t been done for a year,” he says. “It’s great to be back.”

D’Aquin moved to Burnsville five years ago after living in Montana for 25 years. As a work-from-home consultant for the sulphur industry, he needed better internet connections than Big Sky Country could offer, so he cast a wide net and found reliably speedy service in Burnsville.

Those high speeds came courtesy of the 2009 federal stimulus bill that funded a \$25 million project to run fiber-optic broadband to all homes and businesses in Yancey County. With robust internet and splendid mountain horizons, d’Aquin loves his new home. “Here we’ve got different but very intriguing mountains,” he says. “We’ve got a plethora of art and crafts generated by the local population. The food is great; the music is fabulous.”

When the weather is good, Main Street teems on weekends with people drifting in and out of shops. They sit at sidewalk tables savoring lattes and reubens from Appalachian Java. They clutch waffle cones from Cool Catz Candy and Cream. There’s a delightful little bookstore called the Book Cellar. A barbecue restaurant is labeled Pig and Grits.

Trucks and textiles

Beyond the shops downtown, Burnsville has some heavy industry. Yancey County’s largest manufacturer is Birmingham, Ala.-based Altec, which employs 850 who make aerial lifts, truck-mounted cranes and midsized utility trucks, according to Jamie

McMahan, the county planning and economic director.

Glen Raven Custom Fabrics, a textile manufacturer headquartered near Burlington, employs about 250 at its Burnsville plant, which makes the Sunbrella fabric for awnings and upholstery.

A recent addition is a high-tech greenhouse for growing lettuce hydroponically. Devens, Mass.-based Little Leaf Farms plans a \$91 million investment and 100 jobs, with construction expected to start by next spring.

More industry and people are sure to come, because a picturesque town has a powerful pull. Look at that town square: “So incredible, it’s just really special,” says Caroline Musselwhite, who’s whiling away an afternoon knitting outside YummiYarns. And those mountains: “Look around,” she continues. “You drive two



▲ Pig and Grits may be the state’s highest-altitude barbecue restaurant.

minutes and you have a view.”

The daring captain has his eyes forever fixed on those mountains. He was a flatlander, a man of the sea who never set foot in the town that bears his name — yet this town never turned its back on him.

Burnsville is like that: Honoring its foundation, welcoming outsiders, and enjoying the view. ■



Bryan Mims is a writer and reporter at WRAL-TV in Raleigh.