

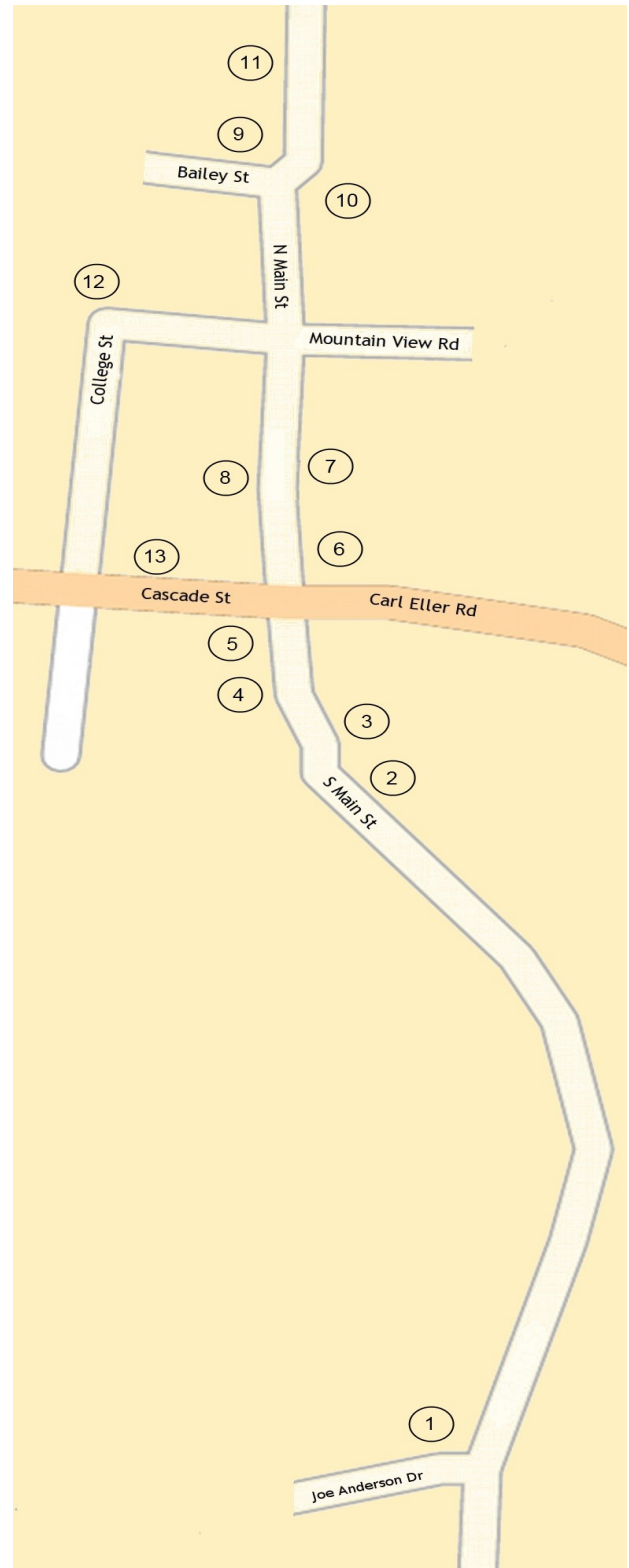
## *Madison County, NC Self-Guided Walking Tours*

# *Mars Hill, NC*

Mars Hill is a town that is rich in history, character, and people. It is known for its beautiful mountain views and picturesque setting. The town's history is inextricably linked with that of Mars Hill University, the oldest educational institution still in its original location in western NC. Many of the historic homes and buildings on Main Street showcase this connection between the town and the university.



The history of Mars Hill began before 1856 when there were no more than ten families living on what was known as Pleasant Hill. Several of these families founded an academy to educate their children—the French Broad Academy which eventually became Mars Hill University. When the village of Mars Hill was incorporated in 1893, the corporate limits were set at nine hundred yards in all directions from the northwest corner of the first college building. As the college grew, the town grew also. A general store was built, a doctor's office established, and boarding houses opened for college students. The year 1913 was a boom year for the growing community. Several new buildings were erected, including two stores, a bank building, general store, drug store. Many of the homes and the businesses built during this time remain as a reminder of the town's history.



## 1 Vann House 260 S Main St.

Built in 1934 by Dr. L.L. Vann. Cornelia Howell, his wife and head of the Modern Language Department at Mars Hill College, grew up in Texas which influenced the design of the house. They operated it as a boarding house for female students at the college and is presently a private residence.



## 2 Baird House 173 S Main St.

Built in the early 1900s by the patients of Dr. John Hannibal Baird in grateful appreciation for his services. Dr. Baird was a turn-of-the-century circuit riding medical doctor. The house was considered the grandest in the area. His son (Dr. John Baird) and daughter-in-law, Lexine Williams Baird inherited the house. "Aunt Lex" operated it as a boarding house for male students of the college or "Lex's boys" as they were called. Now a private residence, it operated as a B & B from 1981 until 2006.



## 3 Robinson House 139 S Main St.

Built by Dr. Locke Robinson. Practiced general medicine in the town in the mid 1900s. His office was in a two-story house where the gazebo now stands. Patients affectionately called him "Dr. Locke." He would often travel for days at a time to treat patients in the mountain communities—sometimes without pay. Operated for a while as a Bed & Breakfast Inn, it is now a private residence.



## 4 Jarvis House 72 S Main St.

Built in the 1930s by Obadiah "Obe" Jarvis and Althea Ray Jarvis. At their death, it was given to the college and has been used as a guest house for the college and as a rooming house for male college students. It now houses university students.



## 5 Visitor Center 56 S Main St.

Originally built as a gas station, this structure became a Sinclair station in the 1930s and later was a BP station. In the 1950s it was operated by Carl "Babe" Eller who served for many years as alderman for Mars Hill and as Mayor from 1970-71. The road leading from Interstate 26 to Main Street is named after him. It was extensively renovated and became the Visitor Center in 2011.



## 6 Gazebo Park Corner of Main St.

The gazebo and park were part of a Small Towns grant in the late 1990s. In the early 1900s, there was a 2-story house on this property built by the merchant R. S. Gibbs. The house later served as the medical offices of Dr. Locke Robinson, Dr. Otis Duck, and a dentist, Dr. Bruce Sams. Stacked neatly on the porch would be stacks of flour sacks that patients would bring for Mrs. Robinson to sew into dresses for her daughter.



## 7 Brick Building 9 & 7 S Main St.

The brick building on the east side of Main Street was the first brick building built in the town (from bricks supplied by a brick kiln just on the west outskirts of town). The building was the R.S. Gibbs General Store in the mid 1900s and was then purchased by J.F. Robinson. His wife Wilaree ran an exclusive dress shop—Four Seasons Dress Shop (known to locals as Robinson's). Women came from Asheville and as far away as Charlotte and even from South Carolina and Tennessee to shop there.



**HOMES ARE PRIVATE RESIDENCES  
AND ARE NOT OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

## 8 Brick Buildings 14 & 26 S Main St.

**26 S. Main** was the location of the Bank of Mars Hill which was robbed on September 11, 1935. A switchboard operator rang the fire alarm and the startled robbers fled the bank with \$2000 spraying the town with gunfire as they drove away. A college student was hit in the abdomen by one of the ricocheting bullets but she recovered after several weeks. Police Chief Garfield Ponder unsuccessfully pursued the robbers.



**14 S. Main** was the location of the town's post office until 1960. The skylights in the ceiling were to provide light for sorting the mail. Mail was originally delivered by horseback to the rural areas. A longtime employee, Gladys Jarvis, remembers chipping ice from the feet of the postmaster which had frozen around his legs from the deep snow.

## 9 Mars Hill Baptist Church 67 N Main St.

The Church moved into this location on Easter Sunday 1954. Before that, the congregation met in the current Owen Theatre from 1918. The church was founded when 26 persons organized the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in 1856. When the college took on the name of Mars Hill in 1859, the church was also renamed.



## 10 Mars Theater 70 N Main St.

Built in 1947 by Oren Roberts (son-in-law of Dr. Robert L Moore a President of Mars Hill College from 1897-1938) the Mars Theater operated as a single screen movie house off and on until 1996. Currently, it is a brewing company.



## 11 Smith House 105 N Main St.

The original house was built in the 1850s by Edward Carter (one of the founders of Mars Hill College). He gave the house to his daughter Clarissa as a wedding gift when she married William Asgood Conner who was the first mayor of Mars Hill. They expanded the first floor and added a second floor. Their daughter Marietta Helen Smith inherited the house and lived in it until her death in 2001. Operated as B & B before opening as a bank in 2010.



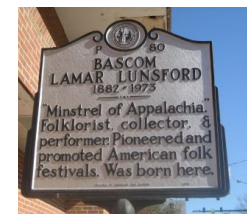
## 12 Owen Theatre 44 College St.

This building was the home of the Mars Hill Baptist Church from 1918 (when it was built) until the church congregation moved in 1954. The College purchased it and eventually turned it into a theater naming it for one of the church's former pastors, Rev. J.R. Owen. The balconies on either side are reminders of the restriction imposed by the college until 1945 not allowing girls and boys to sit together in church. In the summer it serves as home of the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre.



## 13 Bascom Lamar Lunsford Historical Marker 20 Cascade St.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford is credited with many accomplishments in the fields of traditional music and dancing. And, in 1967, he and others created a local festival in Mars Hill, now known as the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival. Held each year on the first Saturday in October, the festival features traditional musicians and shares the day with the Heritage Festival. His collections of ballad manuscripts, phonograph records, letters and memoirs are stored in the Mars Hill University Library.



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