

Monument “Speaks a Silent Message.” So Do a Former Slave’s Scars.

Asheville’s Confederate monuments in Pack Square were designed and dedicated in 1926 by Katherine Yancey Hawkins Gudger, chair of the Dixie Highway Committee for the United Daughters of the Confederacy in North Carolina. Her ancestors, and the ancestors of her husband, U.S. Rep. James Madison Gudger Jr., were among the largest slaveholders in Buncombe County prior to the Civil War.



Katherine Gudger

In unveiling the granite and bronze monuments to The Dixie Highway and Confederate officers Gen. Robert E. Lee and Col. John Connally, Katherine Gudger said they would “speak a silent message through all the coming years,” and would help “keep alive Southern traditions, and perpetuate ... the true history of the Southland.”

Living not far away at the same time those monuments were unveiled was another Gudger, with a different message and a much different perspective on the history of the South.

Sarah Gudger, a former slave whose father had adopted the surname of the family that enslaved him, was born into slavery on a farm six miles east of Asheville in the Swannanoa Valley. In 1937, at the reported age of 120 years — she was at least 115, historians say, and might have been born in 1816 — Sarah Gudger told interviewers of the Federal Writers’ Project about the life of enslaved people in the area.



Sarah Gudger

“Old Boss he sent us out in any kind of weather, rain or snow, it never mattered. If the Old Boss or the Old Missie see us (resting) they would yell, ‘Get on over here you black thing, and get your work out of the way.’ And, Lord, honey, we knew to get, else we get the lash. They didn’t care how old or how young you were, you never too big to get the lash.” She said, “Lord, honey, I took a thousand lashings in my day. Sometimes my poor old body be sore for a week.”

“I never knowed what it was to rest,” Sarah recalled. “I just worked all the time from morning until late at night,” working in the fields, chopping wood, hoeing corn, carding wool, and spinning yarn. “Didn’t get much to eat, neither, just a little cornbread and molasses.”

“I never slept on a bed until after freedom, just an old pile of rags in the corner,” she recalled, remembering the end of the Civil War. She was nearly 50 at the time.

Sarah Gudger died in Asheville in 1938.