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WCHS Announces Velma Rose Combs Burnley as Final 2022 Inductee to the WCHS Hall of Fame

December 28, 2022



Velma Burnley is seen here working at the Northwestern Bank in 1952. Image courtesy of Sarah Lynn Spencer and the Palmer Blair Collection, Digital Watauga Project

Sai Estep

December 27, 2022

As part of ongoing activities associated with the Boone 150 celebrations in 2022, marking the 150th anniversary of Boone's official incorporation as a town on January 23, 1872, the Watauga County Historical Society (WCHS) has established the Watauga County Historical Society Hall of Fame. Throughout 2022, WCHS has named twelve individuals or groups—one each month—as members of the inaugural class of the WCHS Hall of Fame. For the month of December 2022, the WCHS is delighted to announce that Velma Rose Combs Burnley (1921-2019) has been named as the final inductee of this inaugural class of the WCHS Hall of Fame.

Throughout the 150 years of Boone's rich history, the town has been home to numerous influential women. From Constance Stallings to Roberta Jackson, these women helped shape the place we call home. One of the most significant among them is no doubt Boone's first female mayor, Velma Burnley (1921-1019).

Velma Burnley was born on November 14, 1921, in Vilas, NC, to Rose and Charley Combs. After an early graduation at the age of 16 from Cove Creek High School, Velma moved to Charlotte and attended Queens University, then known as Queens College, and later returned to Boone, where she worked at Northwestern Bank on King Street, in the Watauga County Bank building. Working in our downtown's heart, her position at the bank allowed her to get to know many of the townspeople and establish relationships as well as a reputation for being a kind yet diligent worker. One follower of Digital Watauga's Facebook page recently commented on a picture of Velma, saying, "I enjoyed working beside Velma at Northwestern Bank in Boone in the 1970's. She was a very kind and professional mentor." Velma was also elected as the first woman vice president of Northwestern Bank, making it clear that she had a penchant for success and breaking glass ceilings.



Burnley was one of more than a dozen nominees for Centennial Queen during the 1949 Watauga County Centennial festivities. She is standing fifth from right in this image by Palmer Blair showing the various Centennial Queen nominees. Image courtesy of the Von and Mickey Hagaman Collection, Digital Watauga Project.

Active in the community throughout her life, Velma served on leadership boards of various organizations, including the Rural Economic Development Division, and was only the second woman to be elected as

president of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce. In the 1950s, the *Watauga Democrat* made several mentions of the Boone Credit Women's Breakfast Club, where Velma served as president. The Credit Women's Breakfast Club was created in 1930, in Portland, Oregon, to form a cohesive group of women who were in the retail credit profession. With the goal of personal and professional development, chapters quickly spread throughout the country and internationally.

In 1987, Velma was elected to Boone Town Council, and two short years later was elected as the first woman mayor of the town. Crediting her successful political career to her experience getting to know Boone's people through her position at Northwestern Bank, she remained in her role as mayor until 2005. During her tenure as mayor, Velma oversaw a time in Boone's history that was marked by economic vitality. There's little doubt that her background as a leader of Northwestern Bank made her uniquely equipped to help foster this prosperous time. Her colleague and friend Lorretta Clawson–who also served as Boone mayor from 2005-2013, as well as many years on Town Council–remembers Velma Burnley as a "lovely lady, who led Boone during a time of tremendous growth," and paved the way for other female leaders. Loretta fondly remembers many ribbon-cutting ceremonies with Velma and trips to Raleigh for meetings with the North Carolina League of Municipalities (a member-driven organization that is composed of representatives from various cities and towns in the state, dedicated to improving the lives of their citizens). Loretta stated that she and Velma were always warmly welcomed at these gatherings, since Boone was well-known throughout the state and admired for its development and beautiful location in the mountains.

In addition to her focus on the economic development of Boone, she also channeled energy to support causes rooted in compassion. Recognizing the need for an animal shelter in the area, Velma worked alongside Rachel Rivers Coffey and veterinarian Dr. Jack Martin to establish the Watauga Humane Society, with Velma serving as its first president. She also focused on establishing and protecting green spaces in Boone. Clawson-Burnley Park was opened and dedicated to Loretta Clawson and Velma Burnley in 2010, after they worked together to establish and protect this space at the Greenway. Not only a location for enjoying recreation and natural beauty, the wetlands at the park also provide vital ecological services, including filtering runoff water from impervious surfaces before returning to the South Fork of the New River. Burnley was also an ardent public library supporter. As Velma's daughter Lynn Kellem described in her obituary, "She was an avid reader, checking out four or five books from the library, reading them, returning them the next week." A photograph of Velma as mayor still hangs in the southwestern corner of the Watauga County Public Library. It is also clear that Velma was a lover of the arts and worked closely with Appalachian State University, serving on advisory boards for both the Appalachian Summer Festival and the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts. She was awarded honorary alumni status from the University in 2006.



Burnley can be seen at the center of this image by Jamey Fletcher as she is sworn in with Clyde Greene and Jim Smith at the Boone Council Chambers by Judge Charles Lamm, likely in the late 1980s. Image courtesy of the Historic Boone Collection, Digital Watauga Project.

When we think of a life well lived and a legacy that touches so many facets of a community, Velma Burnley serves as a shining example of what one person can accomplish to benefit the lives of others, long after her own came to an end. Always lighting the torch for those who followed her, we can think of no better inductee than Velma Burnley to help lead us into the new year! The WCHS is delighted to honor Velma Rose Combs Burnley for her important contributions to Boone and Watauga County's social, educational, and cultural history.

The WCHS Hall of Fame honors individuals, either living or dead, who have made significant and lasting contributions to Watauga County's history and/or literature, including those whose efforts have been essential to the preservation of Watauga County's history and/or literature. Honorees need not have been residents of Watauga County. The WCHS is particularly interested in honoring individuals who meet the above criteria but who may have been overlooked in traditional accounts of Watauga County's history and literature, including women and people of color. Selections for this inaugural class were made from nominations submitted by members of the Digital Watauga Project Committee (DWPC) of WCHS. Beginning in 2023, the WCHS will also consider nominations from members of the public, which in turn will be evaluated by the DWPC.

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WCHS Announces Loretta Guy Clawson as 2025 Inductee to WCHS Hall of Fame

December 11, 2025



Loretta Guy Clawson, image courtesy of the Town of Boone.

Ralph Lentz, II, and Eric Plaag

December 11, 2025

The Watauga County Historical Society (WCHS) continues to expand its roster of Hall of Fame inductees for the year 2025, building on an initiative started in 2022 as part of Boone's 150th anniversary celebrations. WCHS is delighted to announce that Loretta Carolyn Guy Clawson (b. 1944) has been selected as the second of its two inductees for 2025.

An eighth-generation resident of the High Country born in the Old Beech Mountain community to Enoch and Viola Ward Guy, Loretta attended Beech Mountain Elementary School before enduring daily school bus rides, one hour each way, to complete her secondary education at Cranberry High School. The year before starting high school, she met her future husband, L. D. Clawson, when he was visiting from Poga, Tennessee, as part of a church function. Loretta graduated high school in 1963, and she and L. D. married in 1964. After a brief stint in Lexington, NC, they moved to Boone in 1966, where they raised their two children—Larry Dean and Sheri Lea—and still live today.

Loretta began her working career in Boone as a sewing room supervisor at the Shadowline factory, worked briefly for Ray's King Burgers, then took a job in the Clerk of Superior Court's office as assistant clerk for four years. As a result of the relationships built in this position, including campaign work for then-Clerk of Court John T. Bingham, Loretta realigned her political allegiances with the Democratic Party, starting a decades-long commitment to party volunteer work and leadership. During this time she also completed some college work and earned a real estate broker license. In 1981, she took a job working for 20 years at the North Carolina Department of Transportation as an administrative assistant for the Watauga County Bridge Department.

In 1997, Loretta was elected to the Boone Town Council, where she served until 2005, when she was elected as Boone's second woman mayor. She served as mayor until 2013, retired for a year and half, then returned to the Boone Town Council, where she was re-elected to another term and served as mayor pro tempore until her final retirement from politics in 2021. During her political career, she served on several town boards, including the town's Community Appearance Commission, the Tree Board, and the Historic Preservation Commission.

As Mayor, Loretta worked with the chairwoman of Boone's Historic Preservation Committee, Bettie Bond, to enable the Town to purchase and successfully preserve the historic Downtown Boone US Post Office on King Street. In 2011, she also advocated for the Town's purchase of the Appalachian Theater, which was later sold to the non-profit Appalachian Theatre of the High Country organization that has restored it and made it the gem of Downtown Boone. Loretta also proposed the resolution for Doc Watson History Day in the Town of Boone. Loretta counts her strong support for steep slope and viewshed regulations as two of her most important, long-term legislative accomplishments on behalf of the community. She was also instrumental in securing neighborhood protections and passage of the 2030 Comprehensive Plan during her tenure in office.

In addition, as Mayor, Loretta established the water-conservation slogan "Every Drop Counts," and created the "Mayor's Tree Fund," which facilitated the Town of Boone being named a "Tree City USA." She traveled to Washington, DC, and Raleigh to advocate for a new water-intake system to prevent the town from running out of water. In 2010, Loretta received a letter from First Lady Michelle Obama congratulating Boone for being designated a "Preserve America Community." In 2012, NC Secretary of State Elaine Marshall came to Boone to induct Loretta into the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, since 1963 North Carolina's highest civilian award.

Since coming to Boone, Loretta has also been a supporter of the Southern Appalachian Historical Association, the production foundation behind *Horn in the West*, one of North Carolina's longest-running outdoor historic dramas. She currently serves as an at large member of SAHA's board of directors. Loretta also continues to actively participate in Boone and Watauga County's preservation of its rich history, serving on the Cultural Resources Board for the Town of Boone and as a proud member of the Daniel Boone Chapter of the Daughters

of the American Revolution. When asked about the inspiration behind her years of public service to her town, county, and state, she replied, “The people needed a voice.”

In light of Loretta Guy Clawson’s remarkable role in shaping the community and political landscape of Boone and Watauga County during her lifetime, including her staunch advocacy for the preservation of Boone’s natural environment and rich local history, we are delighted to honor her with a well-earned spot in WCHS’s Hall of Fame for 2025.

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