

ONE MAN'S LEGACY

Founder of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church, Lees-McRae College, Cannon Memorial Hospital and Grandfather Home for Children

In the late 1800s, a disliked Methodist minister was accused of drunkenness after mischievous boys sprayed whiskey on his trousers. Incensed, he bellowed from the pulpit that Banner Elk, North Carolina, would make good “kindling wood were the Lord prepared to burn the world!” The preacher left in a huff, promising never to send another Methodist to the village. Thus, the climate was ripe for a Presbyterian. Young Reverend Edgar Tufts, an apprentice from Hampden-Sydney Seminary, planned to complete his assignment in Banner Elk, return to marry his beloved “Miss Bessie,” then find a church in an urban setting. However, the lure of the mountain people and their needs led him to --indeed marry Miss Bessie-- but then return to Banner Elk where he famously (and amazingly) became the founder of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church, Cannon Memorial Hospital, Grandfather Home for Children, and Lees-McRae College. If that were not enough, he was instrumental in the beginnings of Avery County (once part of Watauga), helped to establish a bank, and even brought electricity to the village. This story is so compelling that Lees-McRae Summer Theatre is setting it to a musical entitled *From the Mountaintop: The Edgar Tufts Story*.

Janet Barton Speer, John Thomas

Edgar Tufts



Oaks and Tommy Oaks (author and composers for the very successful *Denim King: The Moses Cone Story*) have created the work, and the community is solidly supporting their effort. All of Edgar's founding institutions (the hospital, children's home, college, and church), along with the Town of Banner Elk, the Banner Elk Heritage Foundation, and a group of “first family” historians, are participating in a 2019 summer event: *Celebrating Banner Elk's Heritage of Service*. Displays throughout the town will present vintage photographs from Banner Elk's history, and each institution is uniquely honoring their founder.

Banner Elk has the distinction of being a town founded on service - service for learning, service for healing, service for sheltering children, and service for faith. It was improbable, to say the least, to find a college, a hospital, and an orphanage in a small town. Reverend Tufts' vision breached the walls of improbability and made it happen.

Seldom in good health, Mr. Tufts was a small man who probably had tuberculosis three times. But he had an energy that defied physical prowess. His daughter, Margaret Tufts Neal, would say, “First he saw a need.” He saw impoverished young girls in need of education, so he created a school



Rev. Edgar Tufts started the Ministry of Healing in 1908. This medical facility became the motivation for what would later be the first Cannon Memorial Hospital in the early 1960s. Today, Cannon Hospital resides in Linville and was designated as a Critical Access Hospital in December 2005.



Lees-McRae College has grown from a small school in Rev. Tufts' house to a college with over 1,000 students. At 3,720 feet above sea level, Lees-McRae College is at the highest elevation of any college east of the Mississippi River.



The first hospital was built with a mere \$2,000. Grace Hospital the III, was established in 1932 but today serves as Tate Dorm for the Lees-McRae College as the hospital was relocated to Linville.



The first buildings of the Lees-McRae Institute, built in 1910, had its humble beginnings with a class of 12 girls and only two teachers. Today, attendance has reached almost a thousand students.



Rev. Tufts worked with his church members at Banner Elk Presbyterian, featured in the photo to the right, to form a home for orphans in 1914. This was the beginning of Grandfather Home for Children, pictured in the photo at the left. The home is now part of the Children's Hope Alliance to provide hope and healing for children.



Janet Barton Speer



Lees-McRae Summer Theatre From the Mountaintop: The Edgar Tufts Story

Hayes Auditorium, Lees-McRae College

June 11-17

Lees-McRae Summer Theatre is setting for the story of Edgar Tufts to a musical entitled *From the Mountaintop: The Edgar Tufts Story*. Janet Barton Speer, John Thomas Oaks and Tommy Oaks have created the work, and the community is solidly supporting their effort.



EARLY LEES-MCRAE

Rev. Edgar Tufts started a school in his home. Seeing a need to educated girls, he built Lees-McRae Institute. The school housed girls and allowed boys as day students. Later the Presbyterian boy's school in Plumtree burned, and LMI became fully co-educational.



The Academy Building



Lees-McRae Institute 1910



When the school became co-ed, a boy's dormitory was built on the mill pond



Students and faculty when Lees-McRae Institute was a girls' school



Edgar Tufts brother, Arthur, frequently designed the buildings at the institute

To honor Rev. Edgar Tufts' legacy, the Town of Banner Elk and the institutions he founded will join in celebration June 9–July 17. Learn more at bannerelk.com/heritage-celebration

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP: THE EDGAR TUFTS STORY
Presented by Lees-McRae Summer Theatre July 11–17



Edgar Tufts would even bring electricity to Banner Elk by harnessing the Elk River.

for girls – unheard of in those times.

As an educated man, Edgar Tufts believed in the value of learning. According to *And Set Aglow A Sacred Flame*, a book by his daughter Margaret Tufts Neal, “During their first year in their permanent home in Banner Elk, Mr. and Mrs. Tufts began inviting young people to join them in reading around the fireside on winter evenings.”

Interest soon spread across the mountains. “Young people in other communities where he preached heard about the ‘preacher’s school’ and asked if they could board somewhere in Banner Elk and attend the classes.”

The fireside school started in 1899 and support grew quickly so that in September of 1900, The Elizabeth McRae Institute started with 12 girls and two teachers. Local boys came as day students.

Mrs. S.P. Lees of New York increased her interest and her gifts for this school with the motto “In the Mountains, Of the Mountains, For the Mountains,” and in 1903, the ministry of teaching became known as Lees-McRae.

The ministry of teaching which started in 1899 as a fireside school has blossomed into a four-year accredited college providing several niche programs as well as traditional degrees for both residential and on-line students. Now in 2019, Lees-McRae College holds an honored and proud spot in Banner Elk, with an enrollment approaching 1,000 students.

In addition to his work starting Lees-McRae College, Tufts saw abandoned children in need of refuge, and created a home.

Edgar Tufts knew firsthand what often happened to children after the death of one or both parents. His own mother’s early death separated his brothers and



Edgar Tufts graduated from Washington and Lee University and Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and went on to marry Ms. Mary Elizabeth Hall, his beloved “Miss Bessie.” Along with establishing the Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, he was a minister of the Presbyterian Church and went on to form the Grandfather Home for Children.

sisters.

As stated in *And Set Aglow A Sacred Flame*, as Margaret Tufts Neal’s father “ministered to the people of his mountain churches, his heart was burdened with the plight of little children left by the death or illness of one or both parents to the care of elderly grandparents, other relatives, or a neighbor whose home was already overcrowded.”

Thus in 1914, Grandfather Orphan’s Home was founded as the Christian answer to a human need. The Lybrook Farm was selected as the home’s site, because of its close proximity to Lees-McRae Institute. It was to be a year-round home for children without families who could care for them because of the parents’ death or incapacity.

Furniture for the home initially was provided by a “pounding” at the Banner Elk Presbyterian Church. Good cows and chickens were requested. A superintendent for the home and a mother for the children were needed. Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Holcomb answered the call and soon had two little girls under their care.

The demand for care was so great that additional facilities were required. Mrs. Annie L. Cannon, member of the Grier Bible Class at the First Presbyterian Church in Concord raised \$1,000 to support the cause. Grier Cottage was built for boys in 1917, a girls’ dormitory was built in 1918 and the Baby Cottage was completed in 1922.

Rev. Tufts died in 1923, but his son Edgar Hall Tufts continued his ministry of sheltering for needy children. In 2014, Grandfather Home for Children celebrated 100 years of continuous service to boys and girls. The numerous facilities today at the Banner Elk campus continue in the care, nurture, education and treatment of children in need, now under the umbrella of Children’s Home Alliance.

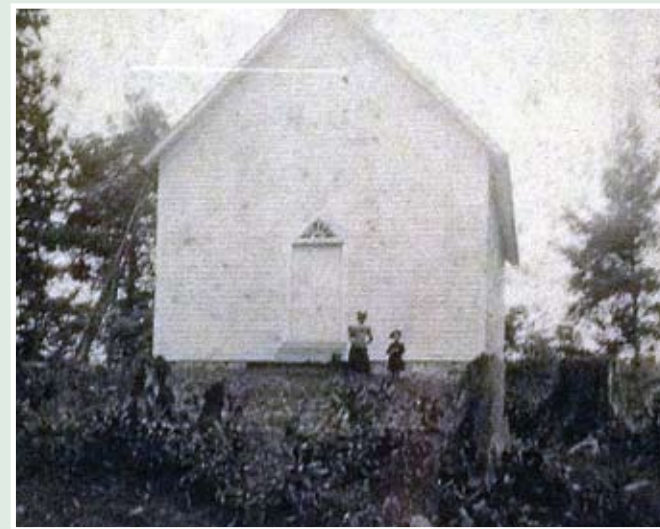
Another of Tufts’ major accomplishments was bringing medical care to Banner Elk. He saw people in the mountains in need of a doctor and clinic, both of which he provided.



Most of the first classes at Lees-McRae Institute consisted of only girls, which was highly unusual and rare for the time period. Boys came soon, however, as day students. Pictured here are students from the first class.



In 1914, Grandfather Orphan’s Home was founded. It was to be a year-round home for children without families who could care for them because of the parents’ death or incapacity.



In the photo at the left, Bessie and the children can be seen here standing outside of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church with Rev. Edgar Tufts in the background. At the right is another early photo of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church with people standing outside.

“Very early in his ministry, Mr. Tufts realized the need for medical care in the mountains. As he was called to the bedside of the sick and dying, he was distressed by the lack of care and the needless suffering and deaths. When he had to take his own wife as far as Roan Mountain, Tennessee, then a distance of thirty miles of rough and often muddy roads to Dr. Woods, and

when his first two children were born with little or no professional help, he began to search for a doctor who would be willing to come to the mountains,” according to *And Set Aglow A Flame*.

After securing funds, Tufts built a facility to care for both the doctor’s family and the patients. In 1908, Dr. and Mrs. Charles Reed, returning missionaries from

China answered the call for two years. Edgar visited a nearby lumber camp, inviting the men to come to his service. A young camp doctor, William Cummings Tate responded and not only attended the service, but also offered to play the organ.

Now known as a blessing to the whole mountain area, Dr. W.C. Tate and his fiancé arrived in Banner Elk in 1910 to ex-

Pictures of Dr. W.C. Tate at the Presbyterian Church and on his horse as a younger man. Dr. Tate was invited to Banner Elk to serve as the town’s doctor by Tuft himself. Tuft saw the need for care in the community and offered him a house, open field, and a chance to use his skills. Dr. Tate had recently completed an internship with the University of Tennessee’s medical program. He went on to become Tuft’s close friend, companion, and advisor.



pand the ministry of healing in a way Tufts never imagined. Hospital facilities were built, rebuilt and expanded, medical care became sophisticated and men, women and children began to flourish. Dr. Lawson Tate followed in his father’s footsteps to continue the family tradition. Another generation of medical care benefited the community as Dr. William Tate followed his father Lawson.

The Tufts ministries were joined like siblings in a family. Today, Grace Hospital

III (established in 1932) now serves as Tate Dorm on the Lees-McRae College campus. Cannon Hospital, originally built in 1962 in Banner Elk, was relocated to Linville in 1999 and is an integral part of Appalachian Regional Healthcare System.

Edgar was an itinerate minister as well, and until his death, continued to travel as far as Blowing Rock where he preached at Rumble Memorial, sometimes riding up on his horse unrecognizable, totally covered with ice and snow. Parishioners would

bring out hot water to free his feet from the stirrups. His ministerial duties also took him to Cove Creek, Hump Mountain, Arbor Dale, Pineola, Elk Park, Shulls Mill, Hanging Rock and others. Some say he was responsible for the beginnings of thirty-three churches.

In the daughter’s book, she noted one “unfulfilled dream” in the Tufts saga. “In guiding and developing the three-part ministries of teaching, healing, sheltering Edgar began to feel one area was lacking

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Edgar Tuft, pictured here with his congregation, originally came to the Banner Elk region in the late 1800's as a seminary student to organize a church. He later returned and settled down when he saw the many needs of the mountain people.

to make the Association a complete service to human needs—that was a home or community for the aged and retired. At this time retirement communities were few and largely experimental. He presented his idea to the Trustees, and at their fall meeting in 1937, they agreed to add a fourth department to the Edgar Tufts Memorial Association. This was part of their statement:

“To make more complete the Edgar

Tufts Memorial Association's program of teaching, healing and sheltering, the Trustees at their fall meeting, approved the establishment of a fourth department—a home for the aged and retired.

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restful home with congenial friends in a Christian atmosphere that still throbs with life, that the fourth department of the Edgar Tuft Memorial Association is planned.”

From 1937 to 1942, Edgar Hall Tufts continued plans for this fourth department, complete with accompanying cottage industries and educational opportunities involving the other institutions. Changing

economic times and uneasiness about the war in Europe slowed plans. The impact and duration of World War II was felt across the mountains and the impetus to manifest a facility for seniors slowed even more. It ended with the untimely death of Edgar H. Tuft in 1942.

Banner Elk has celebrated Reverend Tufts in the past, but Lees-McRae Summer Theatre is in a unique position to bring the story to life in a different way. Janet Speer has been carefully selecting actors who have the look and the heart to play the characters representing early Banner Elk. The music, by John Thomas and Tommy Oaks, is based on mountain tradition and played by mountain musicians. The Oaks are extraordinary composers who have an uncanny ability to wind the music in and out of dialog



John Thomas Oaks and Tommy Oaks along with Janet Barton Speer have created *From the Mountaintop: The Edgar Tufts Story*.

with seamless effort.

Researching the play has included nearly fifty interviews, books, visits to libraries and museums, and work spent meticulously retouching old photographs. The play is set against projections of these pictures as the audience sees the story unfold in front of images of actual events. History and imagination will work in tandem to create a magical moment

in the theatre where audiences may travel back in time to see what Banner Elk looked like in her infancy. Reverend Edgar Tufts was an extraordinary man with extraordinary dreams. From the *Mountaintop: the Edgar Tufts Story* will bring these dreams to the forefront of our imaginations.

Celebrating Banner Elk's Heritage of Service: June 9-July 17

From the *Mountaintop: The Edgar Tufts Story*: June 11-17, Hayes Auditorium, Lees-McRae College. Box office (828-898-8709) website: lmc.edu/summertheatre email: speerj@lmc.edu ♦

Multiple writers and editors contributed to this story: Janet Barton Speer, Susan Tate Carter, Ann and Jim Swinkola, Dudley Gilmer, Margaret Tufts Neal, Gianna Holiday and Nathan Ham.

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