

Legends of the Brown Mountain Lights

Over the years many colorful legends have sprung up to explain the mysterious colored lights seen floating over Brown Mountain in northern Burke County. Most readers will be familiar with Scotty Wiseman's famous 1961 "Ballad of the Brown Mountain Light" with its description of the "faithful old slave" searching for the final resting place of his master on Brown Mountain. Nearly all of the old legends take the view that the lights are the spirits of people who have died unhappily, usually through violence. Fallen warriors, murdered wives, and victims of accidents on the rugged terrain of the mountain populate the various legends. As if to show how legends can reflect the cultures in which they arise, the early 1960s saw the appearance of aliens from outer space as one explanation of the lights in a yarn spun by local man Ralph Lael. No doubt future generations will evolve other legends to account for these still unexplained balls of colored light that arise on the wooded slopes of Brown Mountain, drift, split in two, and dissipate in the cool night air. Scientific theories are practically as numerous as the legends.

Perhaps a little background information is in order here for readers who have never heard of the lights. Brown Mountain is a long sloping ridge on the edge of the Blue Ridge lying within U.S. Forest Service land at an elevation of some 2,600 feet. Highway 181, which runs from Morganton in the Carolina piedmont to the village of Pineola in the mountains, lies to the west of Brown Mountain. One of the three main viewing points of the lights is at a roadside pull-off on highway 181. The other two look outs are at Wiseman's View on the Kistler Memorial Highway (Old 105) on the western edge of Linville Gorge, some four miles from the village of Linville Falls, and the Lost Cove Cliffs overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway (milepost 310).

Since their first recorded sighting by the German engineer Gerard de Brahm in 1771 the lights have attracted scientific scrutiny. Explanations for these mobile spheres of glowing light have ranged from nitrous vapor to ball lightning, from foxfire to a fourth form of energy known as plasma. The U.S. Geological Survey conducted an investigation of the lights in the 1920s, publishing findings that dismissed the lights as man-made. In the early 1960s an enterprising man named Paul Rose constructed a viewing tower on the mountain for closer observation of the lights. Since then various other researchers such as the L.E.M.U.R. paranormal investigation group of Asheville and Appalachian State University physics professor Dan Caton have made extensive inquiries into the nature of the phenomenon.

About the only thing that most experts can agree on, however, is that the lights tend to appear in late summer and autumn on cool evenings following some rainfall. Those fortunate ones who have seen them speak of the experience as wondrous and unforgettable. Mention the topic of the lights in just about any gathering in the Blue Ridge and cries of "Have you seen them?" and vivid anecdotes will swiftly follow.

What are some of the more popular stories about the lights? The following list describes some of the most famous legends, giving the sources where they appeared. In practically all of these legends the lights appear as restless spirits who haunt the lonesome ridge as figures of sorrow and loss.

Legend 1. *Morganton News Herald*. July 5, 1917—copied from C. H. Hites in the *Charlotte Observer* and narrated by John M. Houck.

Bird Carrell was a slave belonging to William Carrell of what is now Adakoa on Wilson's Creek. In his spare time he made and sold brooms and baskets, hoarding the proceeds. In the fall of 1864-65, Bird and other slaves were drafted for the defense of the Confederate port of Wilmington. There he died of disease. Twelve years later Bird's aged mother, Barbery, told Houck that Bird had appeared to her and told her the location of his buried gold and silver. She thought that Houck, a surveyor, would assist her in finding the tall spruce pine on Brown Mountain marking the hoard.

Legend 2. *Charlotte Observer* 11-15-1942 (Ashton Chapman)

In the year 1200, a great battle was fought between the Catawba and Cherokee in the vicinity of Brown Mountain. "The lights are the spirits of the Indian maidens hunting their husbands and sweethearts who died in the battle."

Legend 3. *Roaming the Mountains* by John Parris

Scotty Wiseman's song "Brown Mountain Light" and Uncle Fate Wiseman. Fate had been a cattle drover and wagon driver as a boy before the Civil War. He loved to view Brown Mountain from the point on Linville Gorge that now bears his name. One legend he heard was of a low country planter who lost his way in the mountains while hunting. A faithful old slave came up to search for him with a lantern—without success. "Now the old slave is gone but his spirit wanders on and the old lantern still casts its light."

Legend 4. *Balsam Groves of the Grandfather Mountain* by Shepherd M. Dugger

Years ago on Jonas Ridge a man murdered his wife, whose body was never found. Foul play was suspected but the husband claimed that suspicious bloodstains were from a slaughtered pig. When search parties began combing Brown Mountain, the lights appeared. Some searchers feared the lights were the woman returning to haunt her killer, or to scare off the searchers. Years after the man's death, his wife's bones were found under a cliff.

Legend 5. "The Lights of Brown Mountain," *North Carolina Folklore*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1948

A young man fell in love with a mountain girl who lived with her father on Brown Mountain. He visited her nightly, coming through the dangerous woods from his village. They agreed to marry. On the evening of their departure she lit a pine torch and went to greet him. He never returned and she took a torch out every night crossing back and forth on Brown Mountain to look for him.

Legend 6. Revolutionary War Soldier from *Watauga Democrat*, Boone, Feb. 1, 1982

A family settled in the Brown Mountain area in the 1700s. When the Revolutionary War began, the father enlisted, leaving behind his wife and three children. The war over, he returned home to find his homestead in ruins. Desperately he took to the nearby mountain range searching for his missing loved ones. Finally, he died alone and in despair atop Brown Mountain, and today his spirit continues the search.



While scientific-minded observers might suppose the wavering lights to be the effect of wind currents upon some purely natural light source, romantic-minded viewers have consistently held that the lights moved intentionally. Some kind of consciousness, they felt (and still feel to this day) animates the light spheres, directing them in patterns that suggest deliberate searching. Thus the Brown Mountain Lights take top place among the diverse “hants” or hauntings in Western North Carolina.

The Brown Mountain Lights legends and their many parallels in other cultures around the world will be the subject of a talk given by this writer at the second annual Brown Mountain Lights Festival, a three-day celebration of the lights in the village of Linville Falls. Lectures by lights researchers Dan Caton, Don Cooper, and David Mull are scheduled for the Saturday of the festival (September 15th). Joining the researchers will be Angelique, who will speak on the lights as part of a sacred dimension of the earth. Asheville author Byron Ballard will hold readings from her drama “The Brown Mountain Lights.” The lectures begin at 10:00 a.m. and will run to about 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. At 7:00 p.m. the evening before (September 14th), there will be an open-mike session during which witnesses of the lights will share their exciting experiences with the audience. Friday night also offers a visit from the folks of the Crossnore Jam who will be playing mountain music. All day Saturday musical performances will go on at the same time as the lecture series. On Saturday evening shuttle vans will carry festival goers out to Wiseman’s View for a possible sighting of the elusive lights. Linville Falls lies at the junction of highways 221 and 183 and at the meeting place of three counties: Burke, Avery, and McDowell.

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