

HISTORY OF MONTREAT

Montreat was founded in 1897 by John Collins, a Congregationalist from Connecticut, and Weston Gales, an Episcopal Evangelist from North Carolina. Both men sought to establish a retreat center in the southern mountains. They were introduced to each other by John Porter, an Asheville businessman well known for real estate dealings, who helped them secure the initial 4500 acres that became the Mountain Retreat Association. A conference, The Christian Workers' Assembly, was held that first year, and the MRA managing committee encouraged people to acquire a lot and build a house. As the committee soon discovered, the cost of the infrastructure to sustain development exceeded revenue. J. R. Howerton, a Presbyterian minister in Charlotte, N. C., who had preached in Montreat as early as 1900, knew of this financial predicament and proposed to the Synod of North Carolina and the General Assembly of the PCUS that Montreat would be an excellent conference center for the denomination. The sale was finalized and Montreat was subsequently rechartered as a retreat center of the PCUS.

Howerton served as the president of the MRA for only a year. In 1911 Dr. Robert C. Anderson replaced the interim leadership and served as president until 1947. His tenure laid the foundation for much of Montreat as we know it today. Conferences grew; children's programming began; Montreat Normal School, which grew into Montreat College, opened; the river rock architecture came to define the main conference grounds. An increasing number of families-built homes for either seasonal or full-time use. Over the decades many of these homes have remained within the same families, affording a depth of generational contact to both this place and to other Montreaters. Subsequent MRA leadership has constantly adapted to changing demands in conference programming and physical expansion, often struggling with financial challenges.

In 1967 Montreat became an incorporated town. A separate governmental structure now collects taxes, maintains infrastructure such as road maintenance and other essential services, and oversees property development. The MRA (also known as the Montreat Conference Center), Montreat College, and the Presbyterian Heritage Center all operate as not-for-profit entities within the town of Montreat. These four organizations, along with a significant number of volunteers (both permanent and non-permanent residents) work together to maintain a high quality of life in this beloved valley and are supported by the Montreat Cottagers annually.