

# REACH

Researching Early Arkansas  
Cultural Heritage

Dalton

ELEVEN

*Rice-Upshaw House ca. 1828*

FORD

CREEK

*William Looney Tavern  
ca. 1833*

*The Rice-Upshaw House  
The William Looney Tavern*

**REACH** (Researching Early Arkansas Cultural Heritage) is a multidisciplinary historic preservation project undertaken by Black River Technical College. The centerpiece of **REACH**—two early log structures: the Rice-Upshaw House and the William Looney Tavern constructed during Arkansas' Territorial era in ca. 1828 and 1833, respectively. Standing about a mile apart on opposite sides of the Eleven Point River on their original sites near Dalton in Randolph County, the structures have been restored to an 1840s interpretive era by craftsmen who used to the maximum extent possible pioneering building processes and tools. The physical restoration was guided throughout by extensive historical, architectural, and archeological research. While many questions remain, discoveries include the realization that the Rice-Upshaw structure was originally a one-story trade center, possibly a loom house, used by its builder, Reuben Rice. Also now accepted is the fact that the William Looney Tavern never served as a residence for its builder, but rather for other possible uses, including his extensive business enterprises. Among these were, it is believed, a tavern or inn, and quite possibly, a distillery.





Family descendant donors Jean Upshaw (Rice-Upshaw House) and Jack and Christina French (William Looney Tavern) donated the then-deteriorating structures to BRTC contingent upon the college's willingness to restore and use the structures for educational purposes and to preserve the cultural heritage conveyed by the structures. The value of the Rice-Upshaw House and William Looney Tavern as sites of heritage tourism is a given. Their value as "silent educators" is equally important. The log structures serve as an education lab for students of all ages, elementary to graduate, and a wide range of academic disciplines, allowing them to connect their classroom theory (art, music, English, Local Community Heritage, Machine Shop, Nursing, etc.) to an authentic setting. The sites are popular field trip destinations for educators and students from throughout the region, as well as those at BRTC.

# William Looney

William Looney was a young man, only 17, according to oral tradition, when he left his home in the Holston River Valley area of East Tennessee to travel by horseback, accompanied by African American slaves, to the Eleven Point River Valley. This was probably just after the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. The goal of his first exploration would have been to hunt; a subsequent visit would have been to locate a suitable place for himself and others to settle. Just when he returned to the Eleven Point Valley to settle is not known; but indisputable facts do show that by 1815, he had claimed as his own certain parcels of land in the valley. He was appointed as a Justice of the Peace by Missouri Governor William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame) and he was listed on the 1815 Missouri Territorial tax lists. He was already married to Rhoda Stubblefield; together they had ten children. Just as his family had held leadership positions back home in Tennessee, William Looney took on roles in his new home that would indicate he was an influential and wealthy yeoman farmer. He was a road commissioner.



# William Looney



William Looney apparently served as a local financier in the days before banks existed in the valley. At some point he planted a substantial apple orchard. Probate documents show that he may have been operating a sort of inn or tavern, ostensibly for river travelers. These probate documents support oral family tradition which holds that William Looney was producing up to 1,500 gallons of brandy per year. He owned a boat landing at Pocahontas in the 1840s. William Looney was a captain in the militia. At his death he was listed as the owner of 13 enslaved African Americans. The exact location of William Looney's dwelling place is not known; clearly, the two-story dogtrot known today as the tavern did not serve that purpose. Dendrochronology dates the tavern's construction as 1833; the Looney family had to have lived somewhere besides in the tavern. Also, archeological discoveries from excavations beneath the tavern indicate that the building did not serve as a domestic dwelling until about the time of the Civil War. William Looney died in 1846.

# Reuben Rice



Reuben Rice is believed to have arrived in the present-day Randolph County in 1812, possibly among the several families who traveled by wagon train from their homes in the Holston River Valley of Tennessee to the new American frontier wilderness. His family and the family of William Looney would have been neighbors even before they settled, along with other neighbor families, in the Eleven Point River Valley. He soon established himself as an entrepreneur by establishing an apparently well-known rural trade center referred to in documents of the day simply as "Reuben Rice's." Its location near what became the Military Road helped to guarantee the success of his enterprises, which were many. These included blacksmithing, shoe-making, stock raising, distilling, and weaving, as well as agricultural pursuits like the growing of flax, corn, and livestock. He married Lydia Shaner, and together they had five sons. Reuben Rice was illiterate, and became a student of one of his sons, William; thereafter he signed his name with an "R" instead of an X. This did not prevent the man from assuming a leadership role in the valley; his "mark" appears on many documents. Elections were held at his trading center. His name appears as one of three commissioners to establish the seat of justice at Pocahontas. Records indicate he owned only one enslaved African American in his early days and is believed to have been opposed to slavery. He administered the estates for many of his friends.

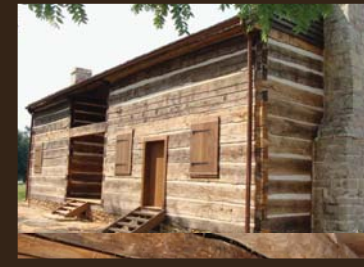
# *Reuben Rice*



The home site of Reuben Rice is also not known; but the original function and form of the present-day Rice-Upshaw House was as a one-story shop, where friend and stranger would have bartered or purchased thread, calico, shaving soap, fabric, sugar, coffee, tobacco, whiskey, and items such as nails and axes produced by the family blacksmiths.

Not until the marriage of his son, Thomas Blackman Rice in the mid-1840s, would the humble structure gain a second story, and even then, it would not become a full two-story house. But the second story, where some of the residents would have slept, did hold a real treasure, stored in pieces on the beams in its attic for untold years: a large hanging batter loom that arrived with the family on that 1812 wagon train. Reuben Rice died ca. 1850. His worldly possessions at the time of his death are not known.

- 2007 BRTC awarded ANCRC grant for restoration of Rice-Upshaw House
- 2008 BRTC awarded ANCRC grant for restoration of William Looney Tavern
- 2009 Rice-Upshaw House restoration completed; BRTC awarded ANCRC grant for completion of restoration of William Looney Tavern, site enhancements for Rice-Upshaw House
- 2010 William Looney Tavern restoration completed
- 2011 Rice-Upshaw House site enhancements completed
- 2011 **REACH** Celebration and Grand Opening; studies ongoing





# 2002 - 2011



- 2002-03 East Arkansas Settlement Study confirms construction date of Rice-Upshaw structure as ca. 1828 and William Looney Tavern as ca. 1833
- 2003 BRTC students participate in art and writing projects connected to the two structures
- 2004 Discussions begin concerning desire for restoration of structures
- 2006 BRTC Board of Trustees agree in principle to seek funds for restoration of structures for use as educational settings
- 2006 Owners Jean Upshaw and family and Jack and Christina French, descendants of the builders, donate structures to BRTC
- 2006 BRTC awarded ANCRC grant for stabilization and to develop **REACH** Master Plan

# Hiram Looney

An inventory of the personal estate of Wm Looney of the county of Randolph deceased, as the same comes to the hands of A. Bealens Looney & C<sup>o</sup> Executors of all and singular the goods and chattels rights and credits of said Wm Looney deceased: taken this 25<sup>th</sup> day of June 1846.

Robert a Negro Man	age	about	50	Years	
Rose a S <sup>o</sup> Woman	"	"	15	"	5 <sup>o</sup>
Hyam	"	S <sup>o</sup> man	"	"	27. 5 <sup>o</sup>
Albert	"	S <sup>o</sup> S <sup>o</sup>	"	"	20
Ann	"	S <sup>o</sup> Woman	"	"	18
Matthew	S <sup>o</sup>	Man	"	"	15
Fernia	S <sup>o</sup>	Girl	"	"	13
Emily	S <sup>o</sup>	S <sup>o</sup>	"	"	12
John	S <sup>o</sup>	Boy	"	"	10
Joseph	S <sup>o</sup>	S <sup>o</sup>	"	"	8
Eliza	S <sup>o</sup>	Girl	"	"	6
Franka	S <sup>o</sup>	S <sup>o</sup>	"	"	4
Henry	S <sup>o</sup>	Boy	"	"	3



Hiram Looney was one of the African American slaves owned by William Looney. He was one of the thirteen slaves listed on William Looney's probate inventories in 1846. He was owned by the sons of William Looney after the elder Looney and his wife had died. In keeping with a practice of the day, Hiram Looney, like other Davidson Township slaves, was hired out to other landowners in the valley. Documents indicate that in 1855 William Looney's son Michael Looney sold Hiram Looney to William Stubblefield Looney, who had a homestead down river from the Looney Tavern.

Hiram Looney appears on the 1870 census for Current River Township near Pitman's Ferry, but on the 1880 census he is listed as living back in Davidson Township. He is one of the former slaves who, after the Civil War, established a post-emancipation settlement on land near the Looney Farmstead. Hiram Looney apparently returned to the area where he had been from his earliest time in the Eleven Point River Valley. His tombstone is located near the Looney Tavern on land that was a part of the original William Looney homestead.

# Downey Family



The story of the restored historical structure that is today called the William Looney Tavern would not be complete nor accurate without acknowledgement of the significant role of the Downey family and its part in the long historic narrative thread of history of the two-story dogtrot on the west bank of the Eleven Point River. At the death of William Looney (1846) and his wife Rhoda Stubblefield Looney (1847), the Looney homestead, including the large log structure, would in time pass into the hands of their son, William S. Looney. His wife at the time of his death in 1865 was Catherine Louisa Garrett Looney. She was a woman who had come to be regarded as brave and resourceful during the difficult war years.



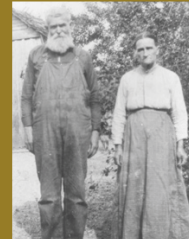
In early 1866, Catherine Looney married a Civil War veteran ten years her junior, Dennis Downey. Dennis and Catherine Downey had two sons, Rufus and Arthur Nicholas. For well over a century, the 1833-built structure would be home to succeeding generations of the Downey family. Eventually Nick Downey would purchase his brother's share, leaving the homestead in the capable hands of the Downey family until the 1970s. Jack and Christina French purchased the farm. As Christina French is a descendant of both Reuben Rice, and to a lesser extent, William Looney, the farm, and the William Looney Tavern, came back to its beginning.

# *What we have learned about our history*

**REACH** has taught us much about where we came from. Many of our ancestors migrated here from current-day East Tennessee, drawn by the promise of land for homesteading, lured by the lush beauty of the Eleven Point River and the wilderness doubtlessly described in wonder and in excitement by returning young men, members of an early kind of “search committee.” The earliest of those to arrive in the area, those including the young William Looney, would have staked out their place, their claim. No embellishment would have been necessary to their waiting friends and families at home back in Tennessee, as this truly was a verdant, game-filled paradise they had found. In the new frontier, the hardy pioneering individual would have room to spread out, to claim as his own the fertile soil of the Eleven Point River valley, to put a little distance between himself and his nearest neighbor. By joining the stream of settlers, these individuals would be a part of a movement, a movement that had begun in the eastern states, a movement that would not stop until the explorers reached the Pacific. They would be a part of the Trans-Mississippi West migration.



**REACH** has also taught us about who we are, because in so many of the ways that matter, we are a part of the unbroken line of those early men and women, Anglo and African American, who were among the earliest to sow of the seedbed of Arkansas's agricultural heritage. Like those who came before us, we are a people who overcome hardships, physical ones and the other, more difficult kind, too, as we work to make our dreams come true. We are a people who are willing to take risks in uncharted territory and to make sacrifices if it means our children and our grandchildren will have opportunity beyond our own times. Like those early settlers, we also gaze on the beauty of the valley. We, too, take joy in the wild turkey and white-tailed deer, and watch excitedly for the occasional eagle. We, too, find peace in the quiet of a night broken only by the sounds of a whippoorwill. We, too, delight on a hot summer day in those cool waters of the Eleven Point River, pushing against the outcropping of rocks, sometimes forging a new bend. We're like that, too, occasionally forging a new bend, a new direction, a new path when it suits us. But even when we do change course, veer outside the normal boundaries that define us, that make us who we are, we always manage to find our way back, back to that original river bed, that place where we are at home, that place where we know we belong. That place where family was, and is, and always will be.



# Funding

Project **REACH** has been funded through multi-year grants from Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council awarded to BRTC. ANCRC receives the grant funds through the state's real estate transfer tax . The funds are for projects that protect and maintain state-owned natural areas, historic sites, and outdoor recreation. Competition for the funds is extremely high; if these funds had not been awarded for **REACH**, the money would have gone to other parts of the state.

## *Become a Friend of **REACH***

*For all of us who have ever called Randolph County home, past, present, or future, **REACH** is an important part of our heritage. The Rice-Upshaw House and the William Looney Tavern are the tangible reminders of that heritage. BRTC encourages you to lend your support to this unique project through a tax-deductible donation to the BRTC Foundation, earmarked "**REACH**," or by volunteering your time. A contribution or a pledge from you will help us continue to provide unique educational and heritage tourism activities.*

*To schedule a tour or visit to the **REACH** sites, contact BRTC at 870-248-4000. Visit our website at [REACH@blackrivertech.org](mailto:REACH@blackrivertech.org).*

# Restoration Credits

Funding: Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council

REACH Project Coordinator: Dr. Jan Ziegler, BRTC

REACH Construction Manager: Ronnie Walker, BRTC

Black River Technical College

Architect: Tommy Jameson, AIA, JAMESON Architects, P.A., Little Rock, AR

Historical Consultant: Joan Gould, Preservation Matters, Fayetteville, AR

General Contractors: KMC General Contractors, Jonesboro, AR

Construction Network, Inc.; Jonesboro, AR

T-Co Construction, Inc., Pocahontas, AR

Log Specialists: Eric Sammons, Barren Creek Timberworks, Mountain Home, AR

Robert Runyan, Fayetteville, AR

Stone Mason: Ben Hurd, Missouri Stoves and Chimney, LLC, Sparta, MO

Archeology: Arkansas Archeological Survey, U of A, Fayetteville, AR

Art Credit: (Pages 2, 3, 4): H. David Wright's carefully researched paintings, used with permission, give accurate depictions of early hunters, young frontiersmen, and family migrations. (David Wright Art, Gallatin, TN, [www.davidwrightart.com](http://www.davidwrightart.com))



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I/We have interest in being a REACH volunteer.  
Please contact me/us at the address or phone number listed to discuss how I/we can be involved.



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