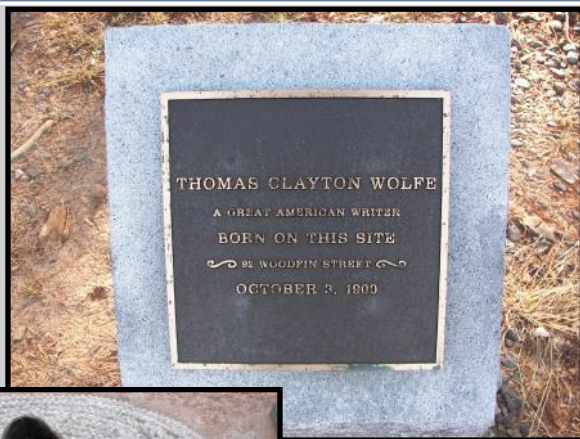


# FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE:

→  
WALKING IN THOMAS WOLFE'S SHOES



WALKING TOUR GUIDE



FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE:  
WALKING IN THOMAS WOLFE'S SHOES

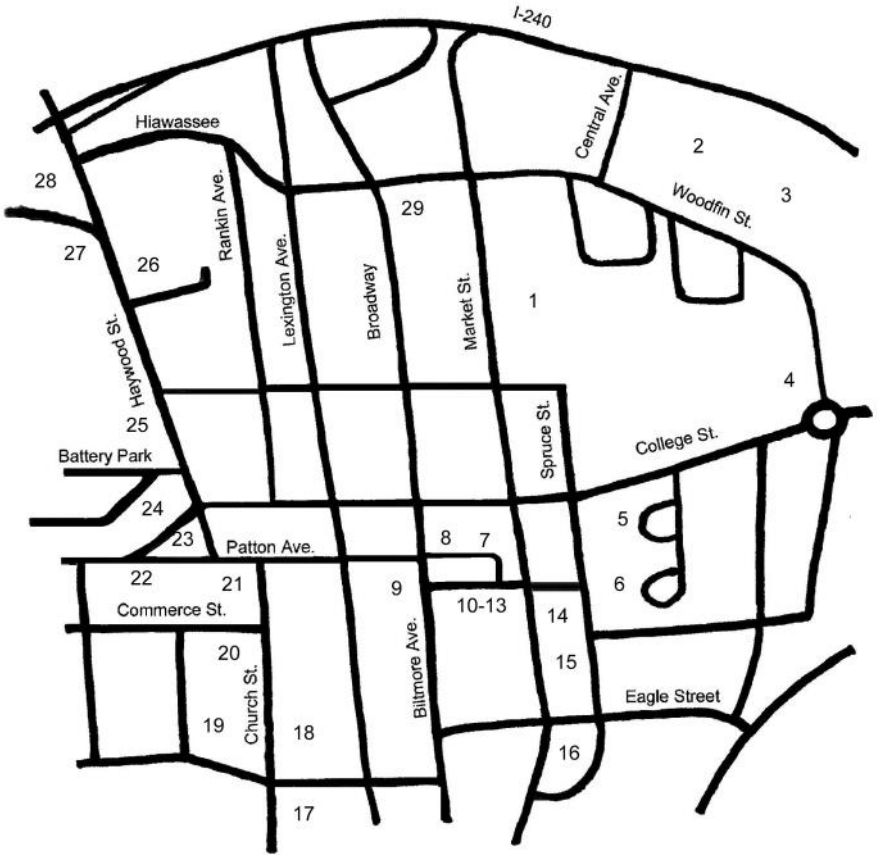
Thomas Wolfe Memorial  
State Historic Site  
52 N. Market Street  
Asheville, NC 28801

This publication has been funded by the Community  
Foundation of Western North Carolina and the Thomas  
Wolfe Memorial Advisory Committee, Inc.

Prepared and edited for publication by the staff at Thomas  
Wolfe Memorial. Images from the Pack Library North Carolina  
Collection. Special thanks to Dr. Terry Lee Roberts.

Copyright 2015  
Thomas Wolfe Memorial

# WALKING TOUR MAP



Thomas Clayton Wolfe, one of North Carolina's most famous authors, was known for writing from life experience. His friends called him Tom. He chronicled growing up in Asheville (fictionalized as "Altamont") in his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wolfe vividly described many places in the city. Some of these structures still exist today, while others are long gone. Wolfe left Asheville for college in 1916, and during the 1920s his visits home became less frequent. In Wolfe's last book, *You Can't Go Home Again*, he lamented that "the sleepy little mountain village in which he had grown up ... was now changed almost beyond recognition." More than 65 buildings were erected in downtown Asheville during the 1920s. The little mountain town had become a resort "boomtown."

After the publication of his first book in 1929, Tom did not return home again until 1937. On this walking tour, you will discover parts of Asheville that Thomas Wolfe saw during his lifetime (1900 - 1938) and many that he remembered in his writing.

"The very streets that he had known so well, and had remembered through the years in their familiar aspect of early-afternoon emptiness and drowsy lethargy, were now foaming with life, crowded with expensive traffic, filled with new faces he had never seen before."

*You Can't Go Home Again* (1940)

### **1. Old Kentucky Home and Playhouse (48 Spruce St.)**

Immortalized as “Dixieland” in *Look Homeward, Angel*, Julia Wolfe’s boarding house is a National Landmark today. Thomas Wolfe spent much of his childhood here where, he lived “a vagabond since I was seven.” Spruce Street once connected north to Woodfin Street. The granite street curbs are still visible along the brick sidewalk in front of the house. Adjacent to the Old Kentucky Home today is the Wolfe family playhouse built by Tom’s father in 1900. In order to save the structure it was moved to the site from Woodfin Street. Tom often retreated to this playhouse as a boy to escape to a quiet place. It served at times as quarters for family servants.

### **2. Woodfin Street Home (92 Woodfin St.)**

A plaque in the YMCA parking lot marks the location of the Wolfe family home at 92 Woodfin Street. Constructed by Tom’s father, William Oliver Wolfe in 1881, Tom and all seven of his siblings were born here. Thomas Wolfe’s mother Julia sold the property in 1920. Wolfe would stand here one last time in 1937 to reminisce about his childhood. It was demolished in 1955.

### **3. First Baptist Church (5 Oak St.)**

Dedicated in 1927, the First Baptist Church incorporates traditional Beaux-Arts planning, and modern Art Deco details. A copper lantern sits atop a dome that features a subtle gradation of color in the roofing tiles. The walls are a combination of orange bricks, terra-cotta moldings and pink marble. Thomas Wolfe noted from his youth in Asheville the Baptists were the most populous denomination. Douglas Ellington, the famed architect who designed the First Baptist Church, was responsible for many of the public buildings on this tour.



Wolfe family outside of Old Kentucky Home ca. 1908. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

In 1883 Erwin Sluder, a local banker, built the house at 48 Spruce Street. The seven room Victorian structure followed the popular Queen Anne style, characterized by a wraparound porch, gabled roof, and bay window. The house was sold to Mrs. Alice Reynolds in July 1889 and underwent an expansion with eleven rooms added. The residential home became a boardinghouse. Reverend Thomas Myers purchased the house in 1900, naming it Old Kentucky Home, a name Julia Wolfe kept when she bought the house in 1906.

“Dixieland was a big cheaply constructed frame house of eighteen or twenty drafty high-ceilinged rooms: it had a rambling, unplanned, gabular appearance, and was painted a dirty yellow.”

*Look Homeward, Angel (1929)*



Wolfe family in front of 92 Woodfin Street ca. 1904. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

W.O. Wolfe moved with his second wife, Cynthia Hill, to Asheville in 1880 and built the Woodfin St. house. The pair hoped the mountain air would heal her tuberculosis. Sadly, Cynthia succumbed to her disease less than four years later.

“With his great hands he had laid the foundations, burrowed out deep musty cellars in the earth, and sheeted the tall sides over with smooth trowellings of warm brown plaster. He had very little money, but his strange house grew to the rich modelling of his fantasy: when he had finished he had something which leaned to the slope of his narrow uphill yard, something with a high embracing porch in front, and warm rooms where one stepped up and down to the tackings of his whim.”

*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)



#### **4. Beaucatcher Tunnel (College St.)**

To the east on College Street a two-lane tunnel was built in 1930 to replace a winding road that went over Beaucatcher Mountain. In 1997 it was refurbished and modernized and new granite stonework installed over the entrances. In *Look Homeward*, Angel Wolfe writes about a walk he took with his fictional girlfriend, Laura James, up to the crest of Beaucatcher Mountain for a picnic. In a letter written to his sister Mabel he recalled, "... it doesn't lead to anywhere... that great glittering tunnel through Beaucatcher Mountain that cost a million dollars. You get through, and there you are. Just where you always were...."

#### **5. Buncombe County Courthouse (60 Court Sq.)**

Originally this building was designed to be a matching Art Deco structure to the neighboring City Hall, but the county commissioners dissented and constructed a more conservative design. This conventional 17-floor Neo Classical steel frame structure with a brick and limestone surface was designed by Milburn and Heister of Washington DC and built between 1927 and 1928. By 1929, both the city and Buncombe County had incurred over \$56 million in bonded debt to pay for a wide range of municipal and infrastructure improvements, including the Beaucatcher Tunnel, this County Courthouse and the City Hall.

#### **6. Asheville City Hall (70 Court Plaza)**

The Asheville city hall building is topped with an ornate octagonal red and green tiled rectangular stepped tower, surmounted by a temple decorated with upright stylized ornamental feathers. Considered the nation's first Art Deco city hall, it was designed by noted architect Douglas D. Ellington and completed in 1928.



Buncombe County Courthouse ca. 1929. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

The Courthouse that Thomas Wolfe knew was constructed in 1903, when he was a toddler. The building faced north and featured a Classical Revival style with a Corinthian portico and a tall cupola. In the late 1920s, a new courthouse and city hall were completed (to the left of the courthouse in the photo above). It cost \$65,000 to tear down and remove the structure.

“There was a Square on high ground; in the center a courthouse. Cars were parked in close lines. Young men loitered in the drug store.”

*Look Homeward, Angel (1929)*

## **7. Pack Square (Patton Ave., Broadway and Biltmore Ave.)**

Pack Square has been the commercial center of Asheville since the city was first chartered in 1797. In 1906 it was named for lumber tycoon and philanthropist George Willis Pack. Wolfe described the square as “one fixed spot in a world that ... changed constantly.” And, the square changed almost beyond recognition during his lifetime. Wolfe would witness many new structures appear surrounding the square.

## **8. Vance Monument**

Designed by architect Richard Sharp Smith, this 75 ft. obelisk was built with local Henderson County granite in 1896. The Vance Monument was largely funded by a gift from George Willis Pack in honor of Zebulon Vance. Vance became Wolfe’s fictional character Zack Joyner. Vance was a three time governor of North Carolina and native of Buncombe County. Wolfe includes the monument in his short story, “The Child by Tiger,” in which a desperado shoots a police officer, and the bullet ricochets off the monument.

## **9. Adler Building (9 Pack Sq. SW)**

Today at the southwest corner of Pack Square survives the only buildings on the plaza that Wolfe would have known from his childhood. The three-story brick building with a projecting corbelled cornice is known as the Adler Building. It adjoins the former Western Hotel which is capped by a richly ornamented pressed metal cornice. Both built ca. 1890 and rebuilt after an 1895 fire. Although they have been altered over time, this group of buildings still features examples of the Romanesque Revival style.

## **10. Asheville Art Museum (2 South Pack Sq.)**

The Asheville Art Museum opened at this location in 1992. For many years the structure housed Asheville's Pack Library. This Second Renaissance style structure, faced with white Georgian marble, features a dramatic two story arched entry. It was designed by Edward L. Tilton of New York. The library was built in 1926. The earlier library on this site, where Thomas Wolfe spent many hours after school, was demolished. Wolfe's father renewed Tom's subscription to the library every Christmas. Today a bronze statue stands at the entrance, representing an angel sold in Wolfe's father's monument shop. The statue was unveiled on what would have been Thomas Wolfe's 83rd birthday.

## **11. Legal Building (10 S Pack Sq.)**

Built in 1909, and designed by architect Richard Sharp Smith, this Renaissance palace-style structure contains one of the first uses of reinforced concrete in Western North Carolina. It originally housed the Central Bank and Trust Company. In his book *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe notes that Asheville Mayor Gallatin Roberts' suicide occurred here following the closing of the bank on February 25, 1931, marked the beginning of the Great Depression for Asheville.

## **12. Westall Building (20 South Pack Sq.)**

Julia Wolfe's brother, William Henry Westall constructed the Westall Building in 1924. William Westall was a prominent lumber and building supply merchant in Asheville. The Westall Building was built at the same time as the neighboring Jackson Building. Both were designed by Ronald Green. The buildings were combined to become one large office complex which shared an elevator. During Wolfe's last visit to Asheville in 1937, he found the Westall building boarded up, the owners ruined as a result of the Great Depression.



Pack Memorial Library ca. 1921. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

“Eugene, richer by twenty-five cents, would leave Gant then, and spend the remainder of the day in the library on the Square. He read now rapidly and easily; he read romantic and adventurous novels, with a tearing hunger.”

*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

### **13. Jackson Building (22 South Pack Sq.)**

Once the tallest building in Asheville and the first skyscraper in Western North Carolina, the 13-story Jackson Building stands on the former location of W.O. Wolfe's Tombstone and Monument Shop. W.O. occupied the site from 1885 until 1917, when failing health forced him to retire. Owned by Julia Wolfe, the property was sold for \$25,000 in 1920. Real estate developer L.B. Jackson purchased it in 1923. Jackson's structure provided a mix of the old and the new, a skyscraper with gothic revival elements. Jackson intended the building to serve as a symbol of Asheville's pride in progress. Its 200 offices were all rented in the first year. In 1937, Wolfe visited several old friends, now lawyers with offices in the building. He marveled at the view of his hometown from the upper floors.

### **14. The Municipal Building (10 Court Plaza)**

Opened in 1926, this structure housed the city jail, police and fire department, a police court, and the City Market in the rear. Arrested for disorderly conduct after a little too much to drink, Thomas Wolfe spent a night here on the second floor on August 18<sup>th</sup> 1937.

### **15. Eagle St. & Market St. District**

At age 14 Thomas Wolfe would rise from his bed before dawn to deliver newspapers for the *Asheville Citizen*. His route was through one of Asheville's segregated Black communities sometimes known as East End. The neighborhood was bordered on the west by Biltmore Avenue, north by College Street, and east by Beaucatcher Mountain. Tom described walking down a steep hill behind his father's shop, past the fire department and onto the dark unpaved streets of Eagle Street where he observed the "greasy light of four thousand smoky lamps in shack and tenement."



Street cars at Pack Square ca. 1910 Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

Asheville streets first saw electric streetcars in February 1889. In the years afterwards, residents and visitors alike could travel throughout town with routes along parts of Woodfin St., Oak St., College St., Patton Ave., Haywood St., Main St. (now Biltmore Ave.), and Southside Ave. Most of the city lines connected with the railway station, making travel to Asheville easy and efficient.

“Outside, in the young gray light, there was a brisk wakening of life. A street-car curved slowly into the avenue, the motorman leaning from his window and shifting the switch carefully with a long rod, blowing the warm fog of his breath into the chill air.”

*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

## **16. YMI Building (Market St. and Eagle St.)**

The Young Men's Institute building was built in 1893 by George Vanderbilt, and designed by Richard Sharp Smith in the same style as his Biltmore Village. It served as an equivalent to the YMCA for the city's Black community, and once housed a drug store, a public library branch, a kindergarten, a night school for adults, a day school, a gymnasium, reading and meeting rooms, sleeping rooms, and a swimming pool. Through a community effort in 1980, the building was purchased to create the YMI Cultural Center, which was established the following year.

## **Church Street**

Depicting scenes and people that he knew well, Thomas Wolfe's writings created a colorful and lyrical slice of scenes and daily life in Asheville. This occurs, more than in any of his work, in chapter twenty-four of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Leaving school for home, Wolfe describes Eugene Gant's walk through downtown Altamont with his friend George Graves. Wolfe often walked along Church Street during the four years he attended the North State Fitting School. This private high school was once housed in a big pre-Civil War home located at 157 Church Street. Walking up the hill to the north "they pass, among other things, a church." Here you will find several churches that Wolfe remembered from his youth.

## **17. Trinity Episcopal Church (60 Church St.)**

This handsome building was designed by Bertram Goodhue in 1912 in the Tudor Gothic Revival style. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe observed that the Episcopalians held the highest social eminence in Asheville, and his neighboring Presbyterians were less fashionable though solidly decent.



### **18. First Presbyterian Church of Asheville (40 Church St.)**

This Gothic Revival structure was completed in 1885, with numerous later additions. The Wolfe family were members of the congregation and attended services here. During his early years, Tom attended Sunday school in an attached building. Wolfe wrote that “he had all the passionate fidelity of a child to the laws of the community: all the filtered deposit of Sunday Morning Presbyterianism had its effect.” His funeral service was held here on September 18, 1938. The minister read passages from *Of Time and the River*.

### **19. Central United Methodist Church (27 Church St.)**

This congregation first met here in a frame building in 1837. The current structure was erected in 1902. Designed by Richard H. Hunt of Tennessee and built by Thomas Wolfe’s uncle James Manassas Westall, this imposing limestone church presents characteristics of the Romanesque Revival style, and includes details reflecting the Gothic Revival style. Wolfe remembered in *Look Homeward, Angel* that, “From the top of the hill to the left, the swelling unctious of the Methodist organ welled up remotely from the choir, accompanied by a fruity contralto voice, much in demand at funerals. Abide with me.”

“The spires and buildings, the old ones as well as some splendid new ones--hotels, office buildings, garages, churches, and the scaffolding and concrete of new construction which exploded from the familiar design with glittering violence--were plainly visible. It was a fine view.”

*You Can't Go Home Again* (1940)

## **20. Asheville Savings Bank (11 Church St.)**

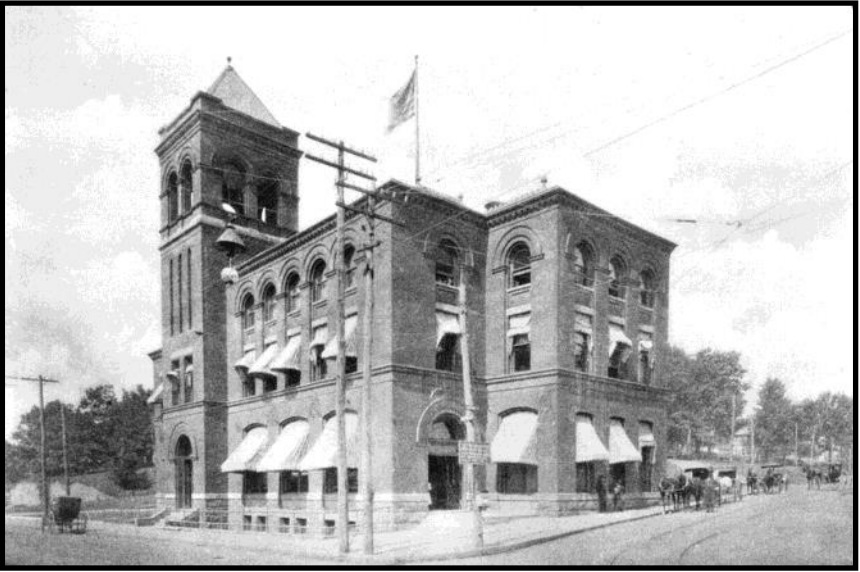
Combined into one V-shaped building from three separate buildings by Ronald Greene in 1922, this building is an example of Neo-Classical architecture. The corner entrance features Tuscan columns with a clock above the door. Passing this building and nearing the downtown at the corner of Church Street and Patton Avenue during his walks home from school, Wolfe recalled seeing the “little pullulation of the town.” Here he would remember the hot blast of steamy air from the Appalachian Laundry, a small brick three-story building that housed several members of the legal, medical, surgical, and dental professions, the office of the Nolan-Brown Undertaking, the First National Bank building on the right hand corner, and the Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store. He would not find these businesses here today.

## **21. Drhumor Building (48 Patton Ave.)**

The Drhumor Building was constructed by Wolfe's uncle, James M. Westall. Built in the Romanesque Revival style in 1895, and designed by architect Allen L. Melton, this boldly detailed building is the oldest standing commercial building in downtown. On Wolfe's last visit to Asheville it housed the Wachovia Bank, an institution that later foreclosed on Julia Wolfe's Old Kentucky Home.

## **22. S&W Cafeteria (56 Patton Ave.)**

Acclaimed as the downtown's most flamboyant Art Deco building, the S&W was designed as a cafeteria by Douglas D. Ellington in 1929, and opened soon after *Look Homeward, Angel* was published. It was constructed at the height of Asheville's historic building boom. In 1937 Thomas Wolfe consumed several large meals here.



The Federal Building ca. 1892– 1909. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

The Asheville Federal Building, that housed the U.S. Post Office, was once located where Pritchard Park is today at Haywood St. and Patton Ave. It was built in 1892 and served as the town's post office until 1932, when it was torn down.

“He sent the letter to the address she had given him — to her father's house. Week melted into week: his life mounted day by day in a terrible tension to the delivery of the mail, morning and afternoon, fell then into a miasmic swamp when no word came, July ended. The summer waned. She did not write.”

*Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

### **23. Pritchard Park (Patton Ave., College St. and lower Haywood St.)**

These streets form a triangle around what is now known as Pritchard Park. It was a vacant lot when Thomas Wolfe stood here in 1937. Between 1892 and 1930 the space had been occupied by the Federal Building and the US Post Office. The park is named for U.S. Senator Jeter Connelly Pritchard who died in 1921.

### **24. Asheville Citizen Printing Office (10 College St.)**

Founded in 1870 as a weekly, the *Citizen* became a daily newspaper in 1885. Built about 1910, with later alterations, this structure was an early home of the *Asheville Citizen*, where Tom's brother Ben worked and where several of the Wolfe boys started their newspaper delivery routes. The *Asheville Citizen* (now the *Citizen-Times*) moved to 25 Haywood Street in 1921 and remained there until the late 1930's. In 1939 when the newspaper offices moved to a new building on O'Henry Street, in its place, a new Woolworth's store was opened.

### **25. Haywood Park Hotel (29 Haywood St.)**

This classic-revival style structure was constructed in 1923 on the site of Dr. Edwin P. Gruner's Sanitarium, fictionalized by Wolfe as Dr. Frank Engel's Sanitarium and Turkish Bath Establishment. In 1923 the Bon Marché Department Store, previously located at Patton and Lexington Avenues when Wolfe was a boy, opened here. Wolfe remembered the store as a landmark in Asheville life. He wrote; "I know that it has always stood with the women-folk at home for the best in merchandise and fashion...."

## **26. Vanderbilt Hotel (75 Haywood St.)**

Thomas Wolfe spoke at the Vanderbilt Hotel in 1937 to local leaders during a fund-raiser event for a new city auditorium and convention hall. The auditorium was later named after him, today's Thomas Wolfe Auditorium. Built in 1924, the hotel was remodeled and converted into apartments for senior citizens in the 1960s.

## **27. Battery Park Hotel (1 Battle Sq.)**

The building seen here is the second building to bear this name. The first was a grand Queen Anne style wooden luxury hotel built in 1886, where it is said George Vanderbilt viewed the landscape of the Blue Ridge Mountains for the first time. After its purchase by real estate developer Edwin W. Grove in the early 1920s, the old hotel was demolished, the hill on which it sat (Battery Porter Hill) was leveled, and the new and current structure was completed in 1924. Returning home in 1925, Wolfe later remembered, "an army of men and shovels had advanced upon this great green hill and levelled it down to an ugly mound." The new structure was the first commercial hotel in Asheville built for businessmen and tourists as an affordable alternative to luxury hotels. Thomas Wolfe stayed here during August of 1937 to hide from friends and family in an attempt to return to his writing, but composed nothing while here.

## **28. Basilica of St. Lawrence (97 Haywood St.)**

Designed in 1905 by Rafael Guastavino, along with architect Richard Sharp Smith, this structure is the only basilica in Western North Carolina. It was elevated to this status in 1993 by Pope John Paul II. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, its dome has a span of 58 by 82 feet, and is the largest freestanding elliptical dome in North America.

## **29. Scottish Rite Cathedral and Masonic Temple (80 Broadway St.)**

Richard Sharp Smith, a Mason, designed the Asheville Temple, which was built in 1913. This building was constructed with 600,000 bricks shipped from Knoxville, Tennessee. The lot next door once contained one of Julia Wolfe's competitors, the "Ozarks" boardinghouse. The site is an example of the early change in Thomas Wolfe's neighborhood from a residential area into a commercial district.

## **Riverside Cemetery (53 Birch St.)**

In *Look Homeward*, Angel Wolfe wrote, "When he came to the gate of the cemetery he found it open. He went in quickly and walked swiftly up the winding road that curved around the crest of the hill. The grasses were dry and sere; a wilted wreath of laurel lay upon a grave. As he approached the family plot, his pulse quickened a little." Located in the Montford Historic District just northwest of the downtown, this site encompasses 87 acres of rolling hills overlooking the French Broad River. To answer the growing need for burial grounds, the Asheville Cemetery Company bought land in 1885 to establish what was first called the Asheville Cemetery and later renamed the Riverside Cemetery. The Wolfe family purchased their plot here in 1918 with the death of Tom's brother Benjamin Wolfe. The adjoining plot is occupied by members of Julia Wolfe's relatives, the Westall family. Some of the Westall stones are signed by W. O. Wolfe. Thomas Wolfe remembered that the city had given the best building site in town "to dead people."

(Ask the Thomas Wolfe Memorial staff in our visitor center for directions to the cemetery.)

"THE LAST VOYAGE, THE LONGEST, THE BEST."



Julia and Thomas Wolfe in 1937. Courtesy of the Pack Memorial Library.

After nearly eight years away from Asheville, Thomas Wolfe visited his hometown in 1937, arriving on May 3. The photograph above was taken a short time after his arrival. The local press and an onslaught of well-wishers and friends vied for Thomas Wolfe's attention. He later rented a cabin in Oteen to the east of Asheville. He left Asheville for New York for the last time on September 2, 1937.



the community foundation  
of western north carolina



*Cultural Resources*