

When education moved from the few to many

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



Prior to 1771, when Chatham was split off from Orange and established as a new county within the Crown Province of North Carolina, there were some itinerant teachers in the area. One of these teachers, Rednap Howell, was sometimes referred to as "The Bard of Regulation." He conducted "Old Field Schools" in the area that was destined to become Chatham. The Quakers living around Cane Creek and Snow Camp had John Allen and others as early teachers.

The population of Chatham in the last decades of the 18th century began to include large landowners who migrated from the coastal areas to escape the humidity, malaria, and fevers which erupted every summer. These landowners controlled the legislature and were not in favor of supporting public education through taxation. They, rather, supported the chartering of private academies to provide schooling for those pupils whose parents could afford tuition. On the other hand, the smaller yeoman farmers struggling to support their families by working the land, probably needed the labor of their children to ensure survival and were reluctant to have them spend time in school. In January 1787 the North Carolina General Assembly ratified an "Act for the Promotion of Learning in Chatham", which resulted in the establishment of Pittsborough Academy. This became one of the leading schools in the state, and in later years was known as Pittsboro Scientific Academy.

A decade later, the General Assembly, still wary of taxation for school support, authorized the Trustees of Pittsborough Academy to raise \$700 by way of a lottery, selling 3,500 tickets at \$2 each. Prizes totaling \$7,000 would be awarded, but subject to a 10 percent reduction to provide the \$700. And you thought that our current "education lottery" was a new idea.

Soon Pittsborough Academy was recognized for an excellent faculty and

its preparation of students to enter the University. In 1800 annual tuition for reading, writing and arithmetic was \$8. For \$13 dollars one could study the classics, English grammar, geography and mathematics.

This first academy had a number of pupils who became quite successful leaders later on in life. Charles Manly and John Owen each became Governor of North Carolina, James Fauntleroy Taylor became North Carolina Attorney General, Basil Manly became President of the University of Alabama, Matthias F. Manly became Justice of the Supreme Court and President of the State Senate.

Between 1783 and 1882 at least seven other academies were chartered in Chatham and a number of others were operating without the benefit of a charter. There were Blakely Academy (1817); Haywood Academy (1818); Tick Creek Academy (1832) whose name bugged people until changed to Caldwell Academy by the General Assembly; New Hope Academy (1855) whose officers and students were exempted from road work and military duty; Wilson Academy (1864); and Tyson's Creek Academy (1861).

Some people hired private tutors to supplement the work of the academies. One of the most distinguished tutors was John Chavis (born circa 1763), a free African American, who is believed to have attended Washington Academy and Princeton University during its leadership by Dr. John Witherspoon. A Presbyterian preacher and schoolmaster, Chavis taught boys who later became leaders, such as Charles, Basil and Matthias Manly and the sons of Chief Justice Henderson. The editor of the Raleigh Register reportedly complimented Chavis by saying that white superiors might take pride in imitating him.

Although the original chartered academies were attended by male pupils, Chatham soon saw the establishment of private schools for young ladies, and as early as 1823 Miss Mary



In the 1920s, the founder of Sears, Roebuck and Co. helped to fund seven schools in Chatham.

brought for arithmetic and other subjects.

Compulsory attendance was considered meddling with the right of parental control, and was not required until 1913.

In 1931 the county was made the school tax unit, replacing district taxes, which had created big discrepancies in the quality of the schools.

Nevertheless, it took many years to eliminate the inequalities that had arisen. Parent-Teacher Associations and other groups often raised funds on behalf of schools.

In the 1920 and 1930 the Rosenwald Fund, established by the President of Sears, Roebuck and Company, contributed more than \$25 million to the education of rural southern African Americans. The grants specified that the community people benefited had to supply cash, land, or labor; that grants also had to come from white friends or public funds, and that the public school system would own the buildings. Until April 1929, Chatham County had received Rosenwald funds for six buildings with seventeen classrooms at a cost of \$21,833. Of this total, \$6,400 came from the African American Community, \$9,233 from public funds and \$5,200 from the Rosenwald Fund. The forerunners of what are now Horton Middle School in Pittsboro and Sage Academy in Siler City were among the Rosenwald schools.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave momentum to the complete reorganization of Chatham's schools and by the 1970-71 school year they were fully integrated. At present we have seven elementary schools (K-8), two primary schools (K-5), two middle schools (6-8) and three high schools.

Education in Chatham, once available only to the privileged few, has steadily improved in accessibility and quality over the years. At the Horton Public School Commencement on May 31, 1970 the class proudly displayed its motto, "Not finished, just beginning." Let us hope that the same spirit will carry all of Chatham's schools forward to bigger and better things as we progress through the 21st century.

Detailed information about Chatham Education can be found in "Chatham County 1771-1971 by Hadley, Horton, Strowd, published by the Chatham County Historical Association, The Chatham News-Record-1976 Bicentennial Salute Edition, and two well researched articles by Jane Pyle in The Chatham Historical Journal, January 2005, about the Rosenwald Schools and April 2006 about the Locust Hill Female Seminary. These Journals are available from The Chatham County Historical Association.

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McKenzie operated "an excellent female school" in Pittsboro. Perhaps the most famous of the female academies was Kelvan, operated by Mrs. Edward Jones, wife of the North Carolina Solicitor General. Originally at Rock Rest on the Haw River, it later moved to Pittsboro. Some other girl's schools were Hooper's Select Preparatory school at Pittsboro, Pleasant Hill Academy and Locust Hill Female Seminary. The Sandy Creek Baptist Association established "The Mount Vernon Male and Female Seminary" with the boys and girls departments discreetly separated by 300 yards, a stream and a heavily wooded ravine.

The students at Locust Hill published a newspaper, "The School Girl", which in late 1867 was said to have circulated into 11 states. It contained three pages of articles and one of advertising from local merchants and professionals. In January 2006 some copies of "The School Girl" were sent to the Chatham County Historical Association by Ms. Sallie Lord Segrist Sypher and one of these is currently on display in its museum. The papers slogan was, "There is no royal road to learning."

The next step in the advancement of education in Chatham occurred in 1839, when in an election authorized by the General Assembly, over 68 percent of Chatham citizens voted for the establishment of public schools. Originally divided into 35 school districts, Chatham was further split in 65 districts by 1864. Prospective teachers had to appear before examiners appointed by the Board of Superintendents of Common Schools.

At the end of the Civil War, many public schools had been closed because of chaotic economic conditions. In 1869 the Chatham Educational Association was organized for the purpose of instructing teachers and to encourage the public interest in improving public schools. Progress in improvement may have been slowed by the inexperience of those involved. In writing about his early education in Chatham during the 1890's, Dr. Clarence Poe said that the widely used Noah Webster's Blueback Speller was an illogical educational tool that chose words based on the number of syllables and the position of those to be accented. Therefore children were taught to spell words they might never use rather than words they might constantly hear in everyday conversation. There was no required list of textbooks and the teacher was expected to use whatever textbook a given pupil

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