

A bygone house lives on in spirit

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



The rapid pace of development which occurred in Chatham County in recent years appears to have slowed considerably. This change in pace is not only the result of the current economic downturn but also because of water supply and sewage disposal problems.

Chatham's subdivision regulations require developers to contact the Chatham County Historical Association regarding any structure over 50 years old or of historical significance. The association does not want to impede a project, but rather document evidence of historical importance.

If a historic structure is in the way and cannot be preserved on site, it could be moved if practical. I am always amazed at how many buildings

were moved in Chatham, even before today's heavy equipment was available. These structures ranged in size from log corn cribs and small buildings such as "Fort Snug," Charles Manley's little law office (circa 1842) now on Masonic Street, Pittsboro, to Patrick St. Lawrence's big yellow house (circa 1787) which was moved twice and now sits forlornly and abandoned out on South Street awaiting an uncertain fate.

Houses not able to be moved because of financial, structural, or other reasons can be carefully deconstructed to preserve the hardwood lumber, large beams, ornate moldings and mantels which were often hand made by local craftsmen. These can then be used in new structures.

A good example of the deconstruction and reuse procedure occurred in 1998 when the old rectory for St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church (circa 1837) was carefully taken down by the property's new owner, Rural Advancement Foundation International, USA (RAFI). The roof,

ceiling joists and chimneys were still square and tightly joined after 170 years, and at least 70 percent of the building material is said to have been saved for reuse, much of it in RAFI's new building.

The old rectory was built in 1837 on two acres of land sold to St. Barts' for \$100. by William H. Harden, a prominent educator and active layman in the church. The building itself was financed with \$1,000 borrowed by John H. Haughton and five other parishioners from the Bank of the Cape Fear.

According to a local legend, right after the building was erected it was occupied by the Hardin family. One family member, a pretty young blonde girl, was being courted by Phillip Jones, a young Chatham planter. They were to be married in June 1839, but used to meet at a spring at the bottom of a steep hill behind the house.

One evening in May 1839 the beautiful young girl, stood up to answer her father's bedtime call and felt a sharp pain in her left side. She assured her concerned fiancé that it was the result of running downhill so fast to meet him. According to the legend, Helen, as she was called, went home to bed and never awakened the next morning after

apparently suffering a heart attack.

The forlorn Phillip returned to the rock where they had met by the clear spring night after night, visualizing how beautiful Helen had looked that last night with her golden hair and flowing white dress. For many years on moonlit nights several people living in the area reported seeing a blond girl in a flowing white dress walk down the hill behind the rectory, cross the creek, and vanish somewhere in the meadow.

The story appeared in the *Chatham Record* of April 26, 1946. One Chatham native, who died over five years ago, was a firm believer in the story. He told me that although he had never

seen Helen's ghost, "it was in the newspaper so it must be true."

I have never seen Helen, nor have I found a mention of Helen in the Harden family history in the Wrenn Memorial Library, Siler City. Nevertheless, I suspect that her spirit lives on in the efforts of groups such as the Robeson Creek Watershed Council, Haw River Assembly, and N.C. State's Rain Garden Program to keep our springs, creeks and waterways running clear and unpolluted.

Fred J. Vatter is Past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.



Though buildings are torn down, the spirits of those who once occupied them are sometimes still sighted and cited. For example, there's the story involving St. Bart's old rectory and a girl named Helen who once lived there...



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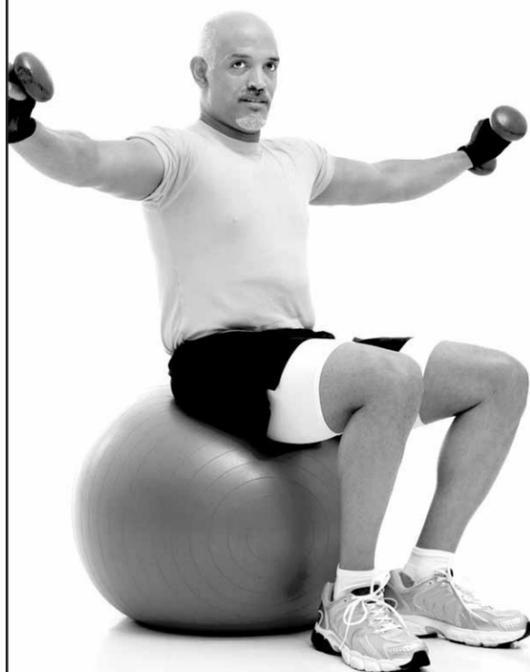
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RUSSIAN DIRT

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The farmers still on the land after the communal farm break-up of the '90s take their vegetables, butter, cheese, eggs, frozen chickens to the markets in the cities and towns. In Kostroma in 1995 I bought most of my food in the daily market in the town center, but citizens generally could not afford to buy there regularly, especially not the wonderful fresh cheese and butter.

I see parallels with our sustainable agriculture movement. Young Americans, many with no farming experience, returned to the land, seeking a simpler, healthier, freer life, often leaving higher paid jobs and a more materialistic lifestyle. They learned how to grow food organically, refusing chemical fertilizers and pesticides, wanting the most nutritious possible food and to care for the land, the water, and the air by not adding pollutants. They resemble the early 1900s American family farmers, who used animal manures, crop rotations, tilling crop residues back in, as well as clearing land by burning brush and tree debris. Our new farmers, like the Russian villagers and part-time farmers, support each other: here through farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, influencing their local Extension Service agents, forming organizations

to sponsor conferences and farm tours (our Carolina Farm Stewardship Association). Few of our new farmers are rich, but a significant number earn a decent living, although it takes an extraordinary dedication, discipline, and "learning as you go" approach.

Our new emphasis on local food is echoed among my Russian friends, who want to know the sources of their food and prefer what they buy locally or grow themselves.

On my five visits to Kostroma, I benefited from their summer farming: dried raspberry tea for my cough; raspberry jam, preserved mushrooms, homemade apple juice, and pumpkin kasha (cereal) for breakfast. The pumpkin had been on the balcony.

From the 1930s until the present, both in this country and in Russia, chemical fertilizers and pesticides were introduced. Tractors and other large-scale equipment like harvesters are still used in both countries for commercial growing. But an increasing number of people in both countries are aware of the benefits to health of eschewing chemicals and eating organically grown food. Economic pressure can nudge us to consider the quality of the dirt our food springs from.

Judy Hogan is a poet, essayist, and creative writing teacher, who lives and farms in Moncure. She grows 50 percent of her own food and sells at the Pittsboro Farmers Market.