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Chatham was western destination for early settlers

The area now comprising Chatham County was once the seasonal hunting grounds of the Occaneechie, Saponi and Keyauwee tribes. There were trading paths through the region linking their settlements, which were usually adjacent to streams and rivers. Eventually European hunters used these paths to seek fur bearing game such as deer, bears, beavers, muskrats and even bison.

Descriptions of the area brought back by hunting parties attracted settlers who were seeking not only plentiful game, but also inexpensive land and low taxes. The period of settlement by whites began in the 1740's and by 1752 a Moravian bishop, Augustus Spangenberg noted that many native American tribes had left the Piedmont area.

Settlers of English and Highland Scot backgrounds soon came to the area by following the Cape Fear and Deep Rivers from their initial settlements in Wilmington and Cross Creek (now Fayetteville). After the 1740's they pushed onward to the areas now comprising Chatham's northern and western sections.

Another group of European settlers came down from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. These people were of Scotch-Irish, German and English Quaker backgrounds. The latter two groups mostly remained in the northwestern corner of the county, but the others moved southeast to settle in the fertile valleys of the Deep, Rocky and Haw Rivers. By 1760 settlers had moved into much of the area we now know as Chatham.

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



The old Cunard Line slogan that said "half the fun is getting there" sure wouldn't have brought smiles to the early migrants traveling into this area. Transportation was over roads that were not much more than widened Indian trails, full of rocks and interrupted by streams. The Cape Fear and Deep Rivers had to be crossed. By 1758, Richard Broswell started a ferry to cross the Cape Fear River to facilitate entry into the south-eastern corner of the county. This later became Avent's Ferry in 1779 and the area where NC Highway 42 crosses the Cape Fear is still known by that name today. The Pee Dee Trail from Virginia to South Carolina, as shown on old maps, crossed the Cape Fear at that location.

An interest in using the upper Cape Fear River and the lower Deep River to access Chatham County arose in the last decade of the 1700's. Unfortunately Chatham's rivers are small with shallows, rapids and falls. Hand poled flatboats were used at first, and later a system of sluiceways, dams and locks allowed some rather small steamboats to reach the area of Haywood by the 1850's. However, frequent destructive floods hampered efforts to keep the Deep and Haw Rivers navigable and the coming of the railroad delivered a final blow to Chatham's river

transportation.

In the 1850's when the North Carolina Railroad was planned to connect Raleigh to Charlotte via Salisbury, a direct route would have taken the right of way through Chatham. Unfortunately, topography and the fact that a number of influential stockholders lived in Hillsborough, Graham and Greensboro caused the planned route to skirt Chatham.

In the early 1800's there was only one road crossing Chatham from East to West. Eventually this road, situated approximately where US Highway 64 runs today, permitted access to Chatham from Raleigh and Salisbury and was used by a stagecoach line. This traffic helped to encourage a few cross road settlements.

The second decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a decline in Chatham's population caused by soil exhaustion, the restrictive policies of one party domination, a lack of internal improvements and the exodus of anti-slavery Quakers. The same network of roads and paths that encouraged settlers to enter Chatham now permitted them to leave by continuing westward.

Thus, Chatham's economy declined and depressed conditions were experienced until the late 1820's when an influx of Easterners arrived to acquire land and exploit the area's natural resources. By the 1830's stability had again returned to Chatham County.

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

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