

# Chatham's farmers a special breed

## CHATHAM'S Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



The location of Chatham County adjacent to the western flank of the Triangle has brought pronounced changes to its people, particularly to the hard working farmers.

In the earliest days of its existence, Chatham was dismissed by the planter class in the coastal area as part of "the back country." The relatively few farmers had come here to obtain a piece of land to call their own. They worked hard to produce whatever meager crops were needed to permit their families to survive. Early on their emphasis was placed on corn, which could feed their families and their animals, but some cereal grains such as wheat were also grown.

Fields were created by felling and burning trees and clearing the land as much as possible with hand tools to remove stumps and roots. The more fortunate farmers had an ox to help. Horses were rare and mules only arrived on the scene in the nineteenth century. Those yeoman farmers planted the same crops in the same fields year after year until the soil's nutrients were exhausted. Then new fields were painstakingly cleared and the old ones were abandoned. The latter were taken over by wild growth starting with broom sedge, followed by pine trees. After some 25 years, the former fields could be cleared and worked again. Some farmers who ran out of productive land moved out of state to areas such as Alabama, Tennessee and Ohio.

Cattle, hogs, horses and chickens were left to forage for themselves in the abandoned fields or nearby woods. Needless to say, at the end of a winter season the poor animals didn't have much meat on their bones. It wasn't until the 1780s that hogs were put in pens to be fattened.

For many years manure was the only fertilizer available to Chatham's yeoman farmers, but in the 1880s the Atlantic and Yadkin Railroad came to the area. The trains allowed imported guano to be delivered from the port of Wilmington. In 1886 one farmer, O.H. Cooper purchased two bags of guano for \$6.80 and had to give the dealer a lien on his crop until harvest time.

After the invention of the cotton gin a number of farmers improved their income by planting cotton. Unfortunately, in the second decade of the twentieth century the plague of the boll weevil decimated the crop, and many farmers started raising poultry and dairy cattle. As poultry production expanded, chicken manure became an important fertilizer, the use of which soon quadrupled wheat and corn yields. In 1911 Mr. Carl Gilliland started a poultry breeding business near Siler City and he shipped baby chicks by parcel post to farmers in ten states.

Before the advent of mechanical refrigeration local dealers bought chickens from Chatham farmers and shipped them packed in ice to resorts on the Carolina coast. One dealer, John Aiken, set up an operation complete with guillotine, cauldrons and cleaning tables to dress 200 chickens daily. Boys were paid a penny for each chicken they cleaned. By 1915 local dealers were shipping a ton of chickens to Wrightsville Beach weekly.

Eventually large scale poultry wholesalers moved into Chatham and had farmers raising chickens for them on a contract basis. Pilgrim Pride and Townsend opened plants in Siler City and Pittsboro, but recent cut back in activity has created some anxiety in the farm community.



This photo ran in a 1943 edition of the Durham Morning Herald under the headline "Negro Farm Family Makes History In Chatham County." Ollie and Flonnie Burnett became full owners of their farm in Williams Township after paying off a 40-year FSA loan in only 5 years. Phillip R. Jackson, FSA supervisor at left, presented the deed of trust to the Burnetts, making them perhaps the first black family in the nation to earn their farm under the Bankhead-Jones Tenant Purchase Act, administered by the Farm Security Administration. Standing behind the canceled papers is Clerk E.B.B. Hatch of Chatham Superior Court. In the rear, left to right are J. Vivian Harris and Lewis Norwood, Chatham FSA committee members and A.N. Tatum Jr., county soil conservationist. The loan which farmer Burnett repaid in record time was \$3,022.

Challenges to Chatham farmers have changed over the years. Prior to the Civil War the ideal farm family had many sons. After the war, national policies, especially tariffs, favored industry. The poor farmers, operating on credit, found themselves squeezed between higher prices for feed, fertilizer, clothing and lower prices for their crops. If their sons tried to earn a little extra cash by working in a mill, it resulted in a loss of labor for the farm. These conditions forced many farmers to enter into tenant farming relationships.

Life growing up on a tenant farm was vividly described by Joe Burke, a retired school administrator, in a program presented to the Chatham County Historical Association in November 2000.

Tenant farmers sometimes moved from place to place. Depending on the agreement negotiated, the landlord got 2/3 or 3/4 of the crop. Joe's father provided his own mules and equipment such as a crude plow, a wagon and supplies. The landlord provided a house and the land.

All the children had to work in the fields when not in school. Joe Burke started plowing with the mule when he was 7 and also picked cotton. His sisters did a lot of chopping with a hoe. The family raised cotton, tobacco, corn, grain and sugar cane. The cane was

taken to a mill which turned it into molasses.

Chicken feed came in print fabric sacks which Mrs. Burke used to make shirts and underwear for the children. The boys were allowed to come along to the dealer and pick out the sacks having the pattern they wanted on their clothes. Joe joked that you could have played checkers on his underwear.

Sharecroppers received no money from the landlord until the harvest was completed, and then their share was used to pay up the bills that they accumulated all season. Sometimes they could end up still owing a balance and started out the new season with a deficit.

Occasionally Mr. Burke would work in a local sawmill to earn a little extra money.

The children picked and sold blackberries and trapped rabbits to earn a little cash.

Tenant farming has disappeared because other opportunities for employment have appeared. Now the proximity of the Triangle has made Chatham land more valuable and some family farms have been sold to developers.

Crops have changed to some extent with tobacco declining in importance and soybeans appearing not only as food, but for soil enrichment. Some farms now raise horses. Fresh and organic crops grown locally have found favor with upscale restaurants and farmer's markets. Dairy farming has become more difficult because of competition from large scale enterprises.

Farming in Chatham has seen many changes over the years and no doubt will continue to change, but I would hope that the work ethic and energy of its farmers will continue to inspire us in the years ahead.

**Source of information:** *The Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 7 No.2, Vol. 14 No.2, Vol 15 No.1; *Siler City North Carolina 1887-1987* by W. H. Hadley, Jr.; *Chatham County 1771-1971* by Hadley Horton Strowd.

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

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