

Cautious steps from colony to statehood

CHATHAM'S Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



The period leading up to the Revolutionary War was a difficult time in Chatham. A large group of citizens were ardent supporters of separation from the mother country, but many others, including some very respectable and well-regarded citizens, found it distasteful to join in a rebellion against established authority.

Nevertheless, Chatham's leadership was active in supporting independence for the colony of North Carolina, the framing of a constitution, and structuring a government for the colony.

In April 1776 Chatham sent five delegates — Ambrose Ramsey, Juduthan Harper, Elisha Cain, John Thompson, and Joshua Rosser — to North Carolina's Fourth Provincial Congress at Halifax. That Congress passed a Resolution empowering North Carolina's delegates in the Constitutional Congress to concur with the delegates of the other colonies in declaring independence and forming foreign alliances. The Resolution reserved to North Carolina the sole, exclusive right of forming a constitution and laws for

itself, and of appointing future delegates to meet with their counterparts from other colonies.

On October 15, 1776, an election was held in the various counties of North Carolina, including Chatham, to elect delegates to another convention in Halifax. The latter convention was charged with framing a constitution and establishing a permanent government for the colony. All Chatham voters needed to vote at the Chatham Court House, now Pittsboro, traveling over the few and very poor roads existing at the time. That election was apparently orderly although other areas of North Carolina reportedly experienced some rioting.

The delegates elected were Ambrose Ramsey, Mial Scurlock, Juduthan Harper, John Birdsong and Isaiah Hogan. The latter two gentlemen served on the important committee appointed to draft a Bill of Rights for North Carolina.

A decade later the atmosphere turned acrimonious. The earlier determination to escape control by the British government now carried over to cause some citizens to oppose North Carolina's proposed affiliation with a centralized government of all the colonies. The Federal Constitution was the big issue in the North Carolina state elections of 1787, and those candidates opposing ratification elected a majority in both houses of the legislature.

In July 1788 the state legislature called for a Constitutional Convention in Hillsboro to deliberate and determine a course of action regarding the plan of Federal Government. The Convention was also authorized to fix a location for the permanent capital of North Carolina. Chatham's delegates were



A 1788 Constitutional Convention was charged with determining the location of North Carolina's new capitol. After much heated debate, it was determined that the state capitol should lie within ten miles of Isaac Hunter's popular tavern in present day Wake County. This photo of the tavern was taken in 1969.

Ambrose Ramsey, James Anderson, Joseph Stewart, George Lucas and William Vestal. All but Lucas voted against ratification. In any case, after six days of deliberation the resolution to ratify was defeated decisively.

When a motion was made that the Convention ballot for the location of the capital, Lucas was the only Chatham delegate voting to proceed while his colleagues voted in the negative.

A resolution was adopted indicating the Convention could not select a specific location, leaving that decision to the General Assembly, but specifying that the capital should be within a ten mile radius of a place determined by the Convention.

Among seven places nominated, was "the fork of Haw and Deep

River" which is now Haywood, in Chatham. Remarkably the nomination came not from the Chatham delegation but rather from General Thomas Person of Granville County.

It took two ballots to achieve a majority vote and the winning location was Isaac Hunter's farm in Wake County. Any capital would have to be within ten miles of that farm, which would have included some areas in Chatham.

Several years later in 1791 the General Assembly finally took action to locate the permanent seat of government within the prescribed area. They purchased a 1,000 acre tract from the Joel Lane plantation on which the city of Raleigh is now located.

The ratification of the Federal Constitution by North Carolina, which was soundly rejected by the Convention of 1788 was again attempted in 1789. By that time only North Carolina and Rhode Island were not in the Union and that fact apparently swayed public opinion in favor of ratification. The Federalists won handily this time, winning by a majority of 118. Of the Chatham delegation only Robert Edwards voted against ratification, whereas John Ramsey, John Thompson and Joseph Stewart cast their votes in its favor.

After North Carolina joined the Union there were no abrupt changes in the conduct of its affairs. The new Federal form of government was looked upon by some as an experiment that would have its effectiveness tested over time. Those fearing a concentration of power viewed the Federal Government with suspicion and eventually formed the Democrat-Republican party to voice their criticism. The Chatham County electorate continued on a conservative course, supporting Adams over Jefferson, and until the War of 1812 erupted, the area enjoyed a period of relative calm.

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



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