

# Chatham's population grew from many roots

Chatham County has experienced a remarkable growth over the years. When the first Europeans came to the area it appears to have been the seasonal hunting ground of the

## Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



Native Americans whose permanent settlements were to the north and southeast. Successive waves of immigration from overseas and other colonies gradually created a network of settlements while the Native Americans withdrew. By 1752 Augustus Spangenberg, a Moravian Bishop, noted that many tribes had already left the Piedmont area.

During the 1700's new waves of immigrants reached the area that would become Chatham by following the Cape Fear River Valley from Wilmington and by coming down the Native American Trading Path from Pennsylvania to the Catawba Region.

Surveyors of the Granville district in April 1746, just downstream from the junction of the Deep and Haw Rivers found only three families—the Parkers, Goodricks and Braswells nearby. No paths or clues to human activity were found along what is now the southern boundary of our county.

To the north, people who had come down the Trading Path were living along Cane Creek by the late 1740's. They had surnames that are common in Chatham to this day: Dixon, Nelson, Siler and Vestal.

Around 1755 John Brooks, Sr. and his wife followed the Cape Fear River from Cross Creek (now Fayetteville) and settled on the south side of Tick Creek. They built a house which is

thought to be the first one in Chatham with glass windows. His descendent, Dr. Brooks Gilmore is presently building a replica of the original house which had survived until about 1940.

The main groups of immigrants were the Germans, Scotch Highlanders, the Scotch-Irish and of course, the English. We must not overlook the Africans whose immigration was involuntary but who contributed so much to the area's economic improvement.

Our local historian, Gene Brooks, in a talk to the Chatham County Historical Association in March 2005, mentioned that by the time of the American Revolution probably one quarter of the settlers in

Chatham were from one of the numerous small German states. There was not a large unified German nation at the time.

The Germans left home because of warfare between the German states, between Protestants and Catholics, economic hardships, and a drastic climate change in the early 1700's. It got so cold that there was no summer in 1701.

Some Germans passed through England and came to North Carolina's coast and the Cape Fear Valley, but most went to Pennsylvania. Eventually a shortage of land there encouraged them to take the Trading Path south to the Piedmont. They were excellent farmers and craftsmen. Through contact with English speaking neighbors and local government officials, many of their German surnames were Anglicized either by direct translation or by phonetic spelling. Fuchs became Fox, Schmidt became Smith, Braun

became Brown, etc.

The Scotch-Irish were descendents of the Scottish Presbyterians who the British had sent to colonize northern Ireland in the seventeenth century. Because of religious friction with the Irish Roman Catholics as well as the

British enacting oppressive mercantile laws as soon as the

Irish economy started to flourish under their leadership the Scotch-Irish migrated to Pennsylvania. Then, because of the same land shortage experienced by the Germans and an attempt to send them West as a buffer against the French and Indians, they took the wagon road south to North Carolina's Piedmont.

A third group, the Highland Scots came to North Carolina via long, grueling sea voyages. The British policies in Scotland had disrupted the middle and lower ranks of highland society, breaking up the clans. Many Highland Scots left to find equilibrium in America and, unlike the Germans and Scotch-Irish they came directly to North Carolina. They landed at Wilmington and made their way toward the upper reaches of the Cape Fear River, settling in Campbellton and Cross Creek. Those two towns merged in 1778 and five years later assumed the name of Fayetteville. The Highlanders who were merchants or artisans settled in Cross Creek but many others farmed the surrounding countryside. Cross Creek became the commercial hub of the Cape Fear backcountry. The Highlanders along the Cape Fear Valley are estimated to have reached 10,000 in number by the time of the American Revolution. Soon they too reached Chatham.

A later group of immigrants to Chatham were the English planters, who came inland to escape the fevers and heat of the coast. At first they were summer residents but later stayed and developed plantations here. They organized good schools and academies for their own children, but also brought the evils of slavery with them. A Federal census in 1790 showed the population of Chatham as 9,221 of which 1,632 were slaves owned by 310 slave holders. Only 31 of the slave holders owned 10 or more slaves. However, some wealthier families who came to acquire land in the Deep River Valley were said to have owned at least 100 slaves. Although the immigration of African-Americans was forced upon them, their valued contributions to the growth and progress of Chatham must be recognized and appreciated. While most worked as field hands, many became skilled carpenters and builders.

Recent immigration patterns have involved an influx of people from many parts of the country to work in Research Triangle and to settle in our retirement communities. A major source of new people has been the arrival of Hispanic folk from Central America seeking work, an opportunity for upward mobility and escape from political restraints.

In the 1980 census it was reported that 28,379 of the 33,415 Chatham residents were born in the county. In April 2000 the census showed 49,239 residents and a 2006 estimate was 57,708, an 8,374 (17 percent) increase. It will be interesting to see the numbers and composition of the population in the next census.

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



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