

Museum History

An earlier version of the Chatham Historical Museum came into being with the renovation of the Chatham County Courthouse in 1990, when the county commissioners approved the use of a small room in the southwest corner of the first floor by the Chatham County Historical Association. Cabinets that had once been part of the tax office were reworked for exhibit cases and storage, a discarded desk and chair were refinished for office use, and volunteers donated their time and energy to create exhibits and keep the museum open. A museum was born!



"Chatham People" exhibit that was on display in the "old" museum at the time of the 2010 courthouse fire.

Jane Pyle, a volunteer curator, worked tirelessly for many years to collect and exhibit Chatham history. Exhibits in the museum included artifacts from the museum's permanent collection and topical displays that changed three to four times a year. A small conference room next to the museum was also used for displays. Loyal volunteers opened the museum on Wednesday afternoons and First Sundays.

All of that changed late Thursday afternoon, March 25, 2010, when fire broke out in the courthouse. Most of the roof and much of the building's interior were destroyed before the fire was contained.



CCHA volunteers catalog items from the collection recovered from the museum after the fire.

Despite the tragic loss of the building and most of its contents, a southwest wind helped to save the museum collection from extensive damage from fire or smoke. Salvage efforts were begun immediately by CCHA volunteers, who devoted many hours over the next several weeks to dry out items that suffered water damage. Many items required no repair whatsoever, and very few items were lost.

Following the courthouse fire, the Chatham County Commissioners named a task force of interested citizens to make recommendations for the possible

uses of the Courthouse upon its rebuilding. The Task Force recommended that the restored courthouse continue to have a Superior Courtroom on the second floor and that the first floor of the building be devoted to a Museum and showcase for visitors and historical education.

In late 2010, the Chatham County Board of Commissioners allocated a portion of the first floor of the to-be-renovated courthouse for a new museum and CCHA office, and the historical association went to work. CCHA made a lead gift of \$35,000 from savings and promised to raise all of the additional funds needed to make the museum a reality.

Under the leadership of CCHA President Barbara Pugh, the organization appointed an Exhibits Committee in November 2010 with the goal of telling the rich story of Chatham history. A core committee of nine members met for more than two years to determine the content of the museum exhibits, write the narrative and collect the artifacts and pictures to display. The professionals from Design Dimension of Raleigh, hired to design and fabricate the exhibits, were the only part of the team that received compensation for the work that was completed.

Community support for the project was enthusiastic, and many businesses and individuals contributed to the campaign. The entire \$150,000 cost of the project was provided by the CCHA lead gift and donated funds from the community. Volunteers contributed hundreds of hours to design and equip the museum. Fabrication began in 2012 and installation of the exhibits into the museum space began in 2013. The Museum exhibits officially opened April 20, 2013.

**CCHA
Core Exhibit Committee**

*Susan Little, Chairman
Kenneth Crabtree
Ernest Dark
W. Jane Hinnant
Kay Judge
Dan Perry
Barbara Pugh
Jane Pyle
Patty Walters*

Early contributors:
*Shirley Edwards
Walter Harris
Mimi Pollard*



Visitors at the Museum Opening in 2013

A panel outside of the museum entrance door lists the names of museum donors. Plaques placed on specific parts of the exhibits also honor major gifts.

We are proud of the museum and the rich Chatham County history that it celebrates.

*Many thanks to our donors and
volunteers
for making the Chatham Historical
Museum possible!*