

Seaforth History

By Connie McAdams, November 2023

Newcomers to Chatham County (those of us who arrived here by birth or migration within the last 50 years) probably only know Seaforth as a Boat Ramp at Jordan Lake, or the new High School. But before that, Seaforth was a thriving farming community in the middle of the fertile

New Hope valley. Now, only artifacts and memories of that community remain as the waters of Jordan Lake cover the fields and foundations of Seaforth. Road signs along Highway 64 mark the general area of the community.

A 1921 article in the Chatham Record describes some bricks that may be among the oldest artifacts in the area from European settlers. The bricks were reported to be taken from a chimney of the home of a Mr. Benjamin Horton. Two of the bricks show distinctive pig tracks, presumably made while the bricks were drying in the sun. The third brick bears the inscription of the date 1612. This would be a good indicator of the age of the building since it was a custom of the time for brick masons to date a chimney when it was built. The bricks were believed to have been made in what is now Chatham County but may have been brought from “the old country.” The location of the house, which had been torn down, was near Seaforth on the Durham and South Carolina railway on the line between Williams and New Hope Townships.

Historian Heather Leah reports that the New Hope Valley area was populated by the Tuscarora people before the arrival of European settlers. Conflicts between the Tuscarora and the Europeans occurred during the 1700's. Now a few Tuscarora communities are in Robeson County, but the official home of the Tuscarora Nation is a reservation in New York.



New Hope Creek on 1870 Ramsey Map.

The valley was steep and easily flooded. Before there were bridges, crossing the valley was difficult. Because transportation was challenging, the population in the area was sparse. Then, sometime before 1777 a farmer named Cyprett (or Sypart) inherited land on both sides of the creek. He built one of the first bridges in Chatham County, over New Hope creek. His toll bridge and his tavern opened the area to travel and early settlement.

For about a century after Cyprett built his bridge, families gradually moved into the valley and discovered the fertile soil that was ideal for farming. Even though more people had access to the area, transportation was still primitive. Small communities began to develop throughout the valley. The 1870 Ramsey map of Chatham County shows a few familiar names in the area. There is Bell's crossroads and Ebenezer on the eastern side of New Hope valley. Along the creek, family names include Ferrington, Lassiter, Horton, Davis, Foushee, Womble and Clark.

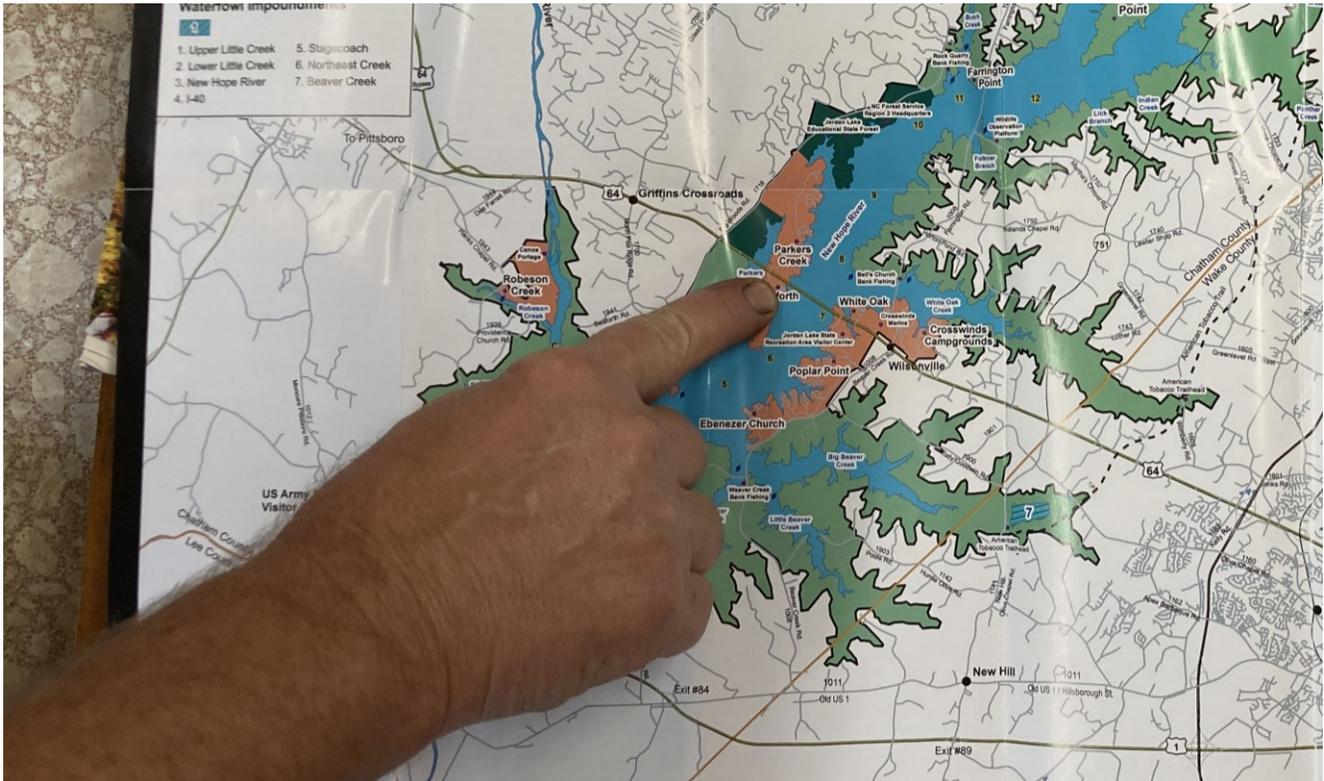
Clippings from the Chatham Citizen newspaper in the 1890's gives a glimpse into life in the New Hope Valley. There were mortgage sales and tax sales and Populist congressional representatives. WD Matthews and JA Goodwin were the delegates representing New Hope in Raleigh. Ruffin Farrar lost his home to a fire. The New Hope school district was defined with the Haw River serving as the western boundary. Cost of books and teacher pay were discussed. The corn crop was good, and Mr. Ragan killed two hogs in February. There were questions about voting irregularities. In January 1898 schools were closed in New Hope Township because of an outbreak of measles.

Another story from 1898 tells of excitement at Bells. "Last Monday night there was a Christmas tree and entertainment consisting of speeches, music, etc., at Belles church near Prince bridge on New Hope (the site of the earlier Cyprett Bridge). During the exercises, the floor of the church gave away, the sleepers breaking, and letting the floor down some 3 feet. Just at this time someone raised the cry of fire and panic ensued. Men, women and children, rushed for the doors and windows. One young lady fell from a window and others fell on her hurting her quite painfully, but no one else was seriously hurt."

There were some interesting animal stories in the newspaper in 1899. "A mink killed a chicken for a colored man named John Rains, of New Hope Township. Rains ran the mink to his cave in the ground, then not to be outdone, tied a hen near by the mouth of the cave and waited results. Soon the mink came for the hen when Rains quickly put an end to this chicken hungry varmint." In a different story, a hog was summoned to be a witness in a trial. "It is a claim and delivery proceedings to try the title to a hog. The defendant gave bond and kept the hog whereupon the plaintiff served notice upon defendant to have the hog at trial to be used in evidence."

Smallpox was a concern in 1899. One man from New Hope was traveling to Raleigh, but because of a reported case of smallpox there, he turned around at the corporate limits, sold his load to another traveler, and returned to Chatham. Another young man was planning to go to Burlington to "wed a pretty girl." He was notified not to come because smallpox was reported in Burlington.

An 1899 newspaper said "very few people know that here in eastern Chatham is such picturesque, and really grand, mountain-like scenery. The whole New Hope Valley appears at one view spread out like a map before you. Here, as in the mountains, you can stretch your eyes, counting from one ridge of trees to another till you reach a distance of 18 miles."



Ross Thrailkill points to location of Seaforth on map of Jordan Lake.

About 1905, The Durham and South Carolina Railroad came. It ran for about 18 miles in Chatham County through the New Hope Valley passing by Farrington and Seaforth on the way to Durham. Two brothers named Duncan, from Canada, who were building the railroad, gave this community its name. Their hometown in Canada was called Seaforth, and this area reminded them of their home. By 1953 the State Utilities Commission determined that the railroad stations at Farrington and Seaforth had ceased to serve a public need and would be dismantled.

Seaforth was just one of a handful of thriving farming communities in the New Hope Valley that existed for less than a century. When the railroad came through, a young man named Bunn Daniel Thrailkill built a small general store beside the train tracks. That store, which sold everything, from hoop cheese to coffins, became the center of the community. Bunn Daniel Thrailkill's son, Benton, and Benton's son Ross still live a few miles from their flooded Seaforth homestead. The Thrailkills have a picture of that original store which also shows the train, horses, and wagons, and the first car in the community. Memories are fading, but the Thrailkills have stories of their family and life in Seaforth before the lake. If you know where to look, you can still see Bamboo that was planted by Benton's grandfather. Now, when you drive across Jordan Lake in the spring you can see the purple blossoms of wisteria blooming in the trees. It was planted by Ross's grandmother.



Bunn Daniel Thrailkill's store at Seaforth.



Ross Thrailkill shows photo of the Thrailkill store.



Benton Thrailkill talks about Seaforth of old.

Another member of the extended Thrailkill family is 99-year-old Margie Seymore Boone. One of seven siblings, Margie was born at home in a small unpainted house. She remembers

working on the family farm. She milked the cow, churned butter, and worked in tobacco. Tobacco was cured in log barns heated by wood fires. Margie and her siblings took turns with their father, staying up at night in shifts, to keep the fires burning in the tobacco barns. Most of the farmers in the area grew tobacco for income and grew gardens and livestock for their own food. Margie remembers when there was no electricity and no plumbing. She and her siblings went to school and church at Bells. Margie remembers a time when the water from New Hope creek flooded the railroad, and her father had to lead their farm animals up the hill to higher ground to save them from the flood.

Benton Thraikill remembers Seaforth as a little village along New Hope Creek. Before the dam, there were places where the creek was shallow enough to walk across. There was no post office. Mail was delivered by a rural mail carrier from Apex. The Thraikill store was the only public building. The train stopped there, but there was not a separate train station. Margie Boone remembers that the train came through in the mornings going toward Durham. Then it came back through later in the day, heading toward Bonsal, and then on to the community of Duncan (named after the same brothers who gave Seaforth its name) in Harnett County.



*Benton Thraikill with Grandmother
Roetta Lawrence Bryan*



*Benton Thraikill with
Uncle Allen Bryan*

Newspaper articles from the early 20th century paint a picture of life in Seaforth. Families were mostly self-sufficient, and many of them were related. Travel was limited, but families walked with lanterns to visit their neighbors. Margie Boone remembers a trip to the beach as a

special treat after the tobacco harvest was complete. There were family reunions and weddings.

There was also some crime. Someone was caught stealing tires, and a forty-gallon liquor still was discovered near Seaforth. A 1949 N&O article reported that an escaped convict was sent to State Prison for breaking and entering at Thrailkill's Store. The robbery involved \$1,250 in cash and some men's clothing.

In 1925, "Prof PG Farrar, principal of Bells school is driving the International school truck that comes over to get the Seaforth school children. Hal Baldwin formerly drove the truck, but he has stopped school."

In 1927 the Greensboro Daily Record reported that a \$30,170 contract had been let to build a new bridge across New Hope Creek at Seaforth. The Chatham Record reported late in 1927 that the State had taken over Highway 90, the predecessor to Highway 64, and the main road through the area. Moore's bridge was rebuilt over the Haw River, and other improvements were made. This provided a "fine road bed for this short line to the state capital."

In 1919 the State Board of Health provided typhoid vaccinations. The Division of Entomology at State College demonstrated new techniques for controlling flea beetles in the tobacco crop. In 1929 a school truck from Bells was diverted so that the older boys could help fight a forest fire.

But in the 1940's the stories began to change. There was a major hurricane in 1945 that caused serious flooding and damage downstream. Eventually, a decision was made to build a dam that would flood the New Hope Valley. The original purpose of the new lake was flood control with the idea of recreation added later. The local families who had lived in the New Hope Valley for generations were opposed to this project. They fought the "government" for years. There were letters in the newspapers and at least one bus load of citizens went to Washington to plead their case. Ultimately, the Corps of Engineers purchased property and families were forced to relocate.

In 1964, 58-year-old Seaforth resident FH Baldwin said, "Everyone in this valley is bitter and opposed to the idea of having to move. We can't buy enough land to put all our friends down around us like it is here. This land is as good as any in the county. I don't know where I'll go. The benefits from the flood control project will not offset the loss of our land."

In May 1967, the News and Observer published a story about the "Blues in the New Hope Valley." The feature article describes fear, confusion, resentment, and bitterness as local families try to negotiate with the government while they grieve the inevitable loss of their family homes and farms. "Some 1,100 families populate the New Hope Valley, which lies like a giant bathtub to the east and north of the dam site, and approximately 150 of them will be forced to relocate." According to records, property owners were being paid \$65 to \$150 per acre for their land. Mrs. RH Stone is quoted, "We want replacement money, enough to enable us to replace our farm which we built up over 15 years. None of us want to go to court, but we will if necessary." One home, in the shadow of Hwy 64, that would be lost to the lake, was built at Seaforth by Hal Baldwin's ancestors more than 100 years earlier. By 1988, a 6.9-acre lot on Seaforth Road, within walking distance of the new lake, was being advertised for sale for \$65,500!

A 1969 want ad in the N&O reflects the sad reality for farm families in the New Hope Valley. Bud Holder's farm machinery auction is being held at his pond, called Seaforth Lake. Tractors, plows, and other miscellaneous equipment was for sale, along with 20,000 tobacco sticks. During the 1960s, Seaforth Lake had been a popular attraction for fisherman. Multiple newspaper stories feature pictures of prize-winning bass or bream caught at Seaforth Lake. From a 1974 N&O article "The community of Seaforth – where Bud Holder once ran a shop that rented boats and sold sardines and tackle using his 25-acre Seaforth Lake – has been buried beneath thousands of tons of fill dirt."

In 1971 the N&O reported that construction workers were about to begin pouring concrete for what was then referred to as the New Hope Reservoir dam. (In 1973 the project was renamed after Senator B Everett Jordan, chief champion of the dam project). At that time, construction of the dam was about 10% complete. The dam was expected to create a 14,300-acre lake. In addition to the dam construction, 19 miles of the Norfolk Southern Railway near the Chatham-Wake county line was being relocated. A short stretch of Highway 64 was also expected to be relocated by summer 1972. About 2.8 miles of the highway would cross the reservoir near Seaforth at completion of the dam, which was scheduled for spring of 1973.



Ebenezer Methodist after being moved.

Families in the valley were devastated by the loss of their homes and farms. Churches and cemeteries were relocated. Bunn Daniel Thraikill was a member of Ebenezer Methodist Church. When he died in 1947, he was buried in the cemetery there near his parents and other members of his extended family. Ebenezer would become just one of many churches and cemeteries that had to be relocated before they were flooded by the new lake. Ebenezer Methodist church was established in a small log building in 1827. The "new" church and almost 300 graves from the cemetery were relocated to a site about 2 miles north around 1974 to avoid flooding from the new lake.

Ebenezer Methodist has occupied at least 4 different buildings beginning with the 1827 log structure. The second of those buildings, built in the 1830's, was given to black members of the congregation after the Civil War. They established the Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church. In March 1971, a short ad in the Chatham Record listed the Ebenezer AME Zion church building for sale to the highest bidder. Later that same month another ad said "Pastor Annie Hart of the Ebenezer AME Zion

Church announced there will be a meeting Saturday, March 27 at the church, starting at 10 am. All persons having relatives buried in the church cemetery are urged to attend this very important meeting."

Most families were dissatisfied with the compensation they received. Of course, only property owners received any money. Margie Boone remembers a family of black sharecroppers who worked on her uncle's farm. That family and other sharecroppers would have lost their jobs and their homes without any compensation. Families young and old, many with no skills other than farming, were forced to abandon their homes. They had to find new places to live and new ways to make a living.

In addition to newspaper articles and personal memories, census records add clues about life in the Seaforth area. The 1920 census for New Hope township included 329 families. There were homeowners and renters with racial identifications of white, mulatto, and black. Most adults were able to read and write, and a substantial number of young people had attended school within the last year. Most men and some women were employed. Most were listed as tobacco farmers or laborers on farms or at the sawmill. There was also a public-school teacher, a cotton farmer, a washerwoman, a merchant, a section master for the railroad, a blacksmith, a boarding house manager, a cook, a carpenter, a mail carrier, and a medical doctor.

Ten years later, the 1930 census provides similar information. There were only 263 families and again there were homeowners and renters, racially identified as white or negro. Most lived on farms and a very small number owned a radio. A few were listed as veterans of the World War. Again, there was a large number of farmers and laborers, but other professions included insurance salesman, merchant, proprietor of sawmill, proprietor of funeral home, deputy sheriff, laundress, automobile salesman, servant, and a group of 10 public school teachers living in a boarding house. Among the teachers there was one married couple, and the rest were female. There was a census question about place of birth, and almost every person listed, and their parents, were born in North Carolina. There were a few migrants from Virginia or South Carolina, but one fellow and his parents were born in Arizona. He was a 59-year-old un-married man, living as a lodger with a young family. He could read and write and listed his job as painter of buildings. He was a veteran of the Spanish American War.

A June 1976 article in the News and Observer explains that Federal Courts still had not made a decision about whether or not to close the B Everette Jordan Dam and fill the lake. "The 13,000-acre project is in limbo, with a giant 10-story dam keeping watch over the still-dry New Hope River Valley, which will be under water if the lake is filled." The same article mentions Seaforth Lake and describes it as "a tiny pond damaged by erosion" but a Great Blue Heron still fishes there.

Although about 150 families had moved out of the New Hope Valley by 1967 and construction of the 10-story dam had been completed in 1976, it was September 1981 when the Jordan Dam gates were finally closed. As the Haw River slowly backed up into the New Hope Valley, the landscape and community of Seaforth disappeared forever beneath the waters of Jordan Lake. Only memories remain.

Today Jordan Lake is a beautiful place. But the families who lived here 100 years ago sacrificed blood, sweat, and tears so that we can swim and picnic, and kayak and hike on the land where their farms stood for decades. If you walk through the woods today, you may still see furrows in the woods where farmers plowed their fields, or traces of old barns or homes.

Resources:

Chatham County 1771-1971

The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, North Carolina

Heather Leah, WRAL ,

Census Records

Various Newspapers:

Raleigh News and Observer

Chatham Record

Pittsboro Herald

Greensboro Daily Record

Chatham Citizen

Greensboro Daily News

Burlington Daily Times News

Raleigh Register

Daily Tar Heel

Siler City Grit

Cemetery Census

Conversations with Benton and Ross Thraikill, Margie Boone, and Charles Thomas