

History of the Chatham County Historical Association

Ancient History—Early Roots

The existence of a Chatham County Historical Association is mentioned in newspaper records as early as 1916. The 22 Nov 1916 *Chatham Record*, records the following:

Col. Fred A. Olds, of Raleigh, delivered a very interesting address here last night before the Chatham County Historical Association.

And in the 19 Mar 1928 issue of the *Chatham News*, the following appeared:

The Chatham County Historical Association was organized Saturday at the home of Mrs. Henry A. London, Historian for Chatham County by appointment of the North Carolina Historical Commission.

At the time of this writing, no additional information about these organizations has been discovered.

1958 – 1970

- The current Chatham County Historical Association was organized on 22 April 1958 at the City Hall in Siler City.
- The organization of this association was sponsored by the Siler City Garden Club Council, the Siler City Study Club, and the Round Dozen Book Club. A nominating committee and constitution and by-laws committee were appointed.
- At the second meeting, on 20 May 1958, officers were elected and a constitution and by-laws were proposed by the committee and accepted. Officers were Mrs. J. B. Earle, President; Mrs. Doris Horton, Vice-President; Miss Helen Siler, Secretary; Mr. Lea Powell, Treasurer; and Mr. W. B. Morgan, Historian. Dues were set at \$1.
- The Association had a membership of 84 by November 1958, and 106 by January of 1959.
- The Association held two or three meetings a year--some featuring guest speakers--most at the courthouse in Pittsboro, with occasional meetings in Siler City.
- The minutes of the Historical Association for October 1958 indicate that the group refinished a cabinet for the display in the courthouse of Civil War artifacts donated

by the Winnie Davis Chapter of the UDC. The display remained in the courthouse for many years.

- Around 1960, the Historical Association presented the county with a portrait of Sir William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, which was hung in the courtroom of the courthouse. The artist was Mrs. Ann Taylor Nash, a native of Pittsboro, who was then living in Savannah, GA. The portrait was destroyed in 2010 when the courthouse burned.
- In May 1965 a motion to study plans for a county historical museum was made and approved, and a museum continued to be on the association's list of possible projects during the years that followed.
- In 1966, Mr. and Mrs. Henry K. Blair of Pittsboro donated the law office of Governor Charles Manly to the Association. The building was moved from its location in Pittsboro to a lot behind the Masonic Lodge and was restored and furnished. The Manly Law Office has continued to be maintained by the Association.
- Beginning in 1969, the association was very active in working on a county history (*Chatham County 1771-1971*) and preparations for the county's bicentennial celebration.

1971 – 1980

- Members and friends of the Association compiled and published *Chatham County 1771-1971*, which went on sale at the beginning of the county's bicentennial celebration. Several editions have since been printed and continue to be available from the Association.
- Newspaper articles chronicled many of the activities associated with the county bicentennial celebration, in which members and friends of the Association took a very active part.
- In 1978, the Association collaborated with the Pittsboro Memorial Library to set up the Chatham County Historical Collection at the library. The collection of genealogical records and county historical information has continued to grow over the years and remains an important resource, now housed in the Chatham Community Library in Pittsboro.
- In 1980, the Association published *The Story of the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company, 1849-1873* by Wade H. Hadley, Jr. That volume is now out of print.

1981 – 1990

- In 1981, the Association made a grant of \$250 for an oral history project then being conducted by the Friends of the Pittsboro Memorial Library. The audiotapes of these interviews are now archived in the CCHA collection.
- In 1986, the Association made a grant of \$7,000 to the Chatham County Historic Architectural Survey to be used toward the publication of a book bearing the title of *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County*, which is still in print and available from the Association.
- The 1980s were a period of reduced activity for the Association. There were fewer activities and longer periods between meetings.
- By 1988, a group of volunteers decided to revitalize and reactivate the organization. Volunteers for officers were Gene Brooks, Marti Dreyer, John Cooper, and Jane Pyle. Bill Dow agreed to line up programs and Fleet Reddish said she would look after records.
- Publication of a journal and a newsletter began in 1988. Jane Pyle served as journal editor until the journal was discontinued in 2008. All issues of the journal are now [available on CCHA's website](#).
- A museum was begun in a small first-floor room of the Historic Chatham County Courthouse, which was renovated in 1990, and CCHA organized a reception for the open house following the remodeling.
- Will and Audrey Heiser volunteered to organize a survey of cemeteries in the county, including an inventory of gravestones. Interested citizens of the county reported the locations of and information about hundreds of cemeteries over the next decades.

1991 – 2000

- The organization assisted in the publication and marketing of *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County*, first published in 1991.
- CCHA co-sponsored with CCCC a very successful lecture series on county history by Gene Brooks in 1994. Audio tapes of these lectures are archived in the CCHA collection.
- A state grant was received to produce a documentary videotape of the New Hope dam project and Jordan Lake, which was published as *The Land Beneath the Waters* in 1997.

- The Chatham Historical Museum was staffed by volunteers and was open on Wednesdays from noon until 3pm. Generous community members donated items to expand CCHA's collection, including Chatham-related letters, deeds, maps, receipt books, and telegrams, as well as a butter churn and Confederate stagecoach voucher.
- CCHA helped organize the reopening of the bicentennial vault in 1996, holding a program and reception.
- In the Fall of 1997, the Association sponsored two series of Saturday tours of the county which involved visiting historical houses, churches, cemeteries and historical sites. The groups traveled by van, visiting one location per Saturday--Gulf, Pittsboro and North Chatham in one series, and Moncure, Siler City, and Mt. Vernon Springs in the other.
- In 1999 the Chatham County Historical Association and the Chatham County Agricultural and Industrial Fair Association agreed to work together to reconstruct two log houses in Pittsboro—the Milliken cabin, which had been given to the Fair Association in 1977, and two log houses, believed to have belonged to the Johnathan Marshall family, given to CCHA by Ellen and Sheldon Rothman in 1999. Crews of volunteers from both organizations, under the leadership of Greg Talbott, dismantled the two Marshall buildings and transported the materials to Pittsboro where they were used to build a single cabin on a lot on Rectory Street between West Street and Salisbury Street.

2001 – 2010

- The Chatham Historical Museum was staffed by volunteers and open on Wednesdays from noon until 3pm and on Pittsboro's First Sundays. Special exhibits featured tools, toys, artifacts from medical history, kitchens and cookbooks, store ledgers, and Chatham people. Curators of the museum during this time were Fred Vatter and Jane Pyle.
- Volunteers continued to maintain the subject matter clipping file, which was moved during this time to Wren Library in Siler City.
- CCHA was involved with planning and fundraising for a new, larger library in Pittsboro in which the local history collection would be maintained.
- Several members of CCHA worked with the town of Pittsboro in the preparation of a nomination of a historic district to the National Register of Historic Places, approved in 2001.
- Volunteers continued to work on the Marshall cabin from 2001 when the roof was raised, until 2005 when a floor was finally installed. Meanwhile, work began on the Milliken house, which had been given to the county fair association and moved to

the County Fairgrounds in 1977. By 1999 the Milliken cabin had suffered storm damage and needed to be rebuilt. Stacking was completed in spring of 2002, the roof was shingled in 2004, and a floor installed in 2005.

- A website, www.chathamhistory.org, was designed by Duane Hall and went online in 2002.
- In 2002, the first edition of *Gravesites of Chatham County* was published—a two-volume culmination of the first thirteen years of the CCHA cemetery project. The publication was reprinted in 2005. Cemeteries and gravemarkers continued to be added to the cemetery survey and in 2006 the entire database was made available online through CemeteryCensus.com, maintained by volunteer Allen Dew. The online system allowed corrections and additions to be made promptly and made access to the data free to anyone with an Internet connection.
- For the website, restoration of the log houses, publication of the cemetery inventory and ongoing activities, CCHA received the Albert Ray Newsome award from the Federation of North Carolina Historical Societies in 2002.
- CCHA held well-attended tours of Pittsboro in 2000 and 2003, and one of Siler City in 2004. A walking tour of Pittsboro was held in 2009.
- The *Architectural History of Chatham County* and the 1870 Ramsey map were reprinted and continue to be available for purchase in the Museum giftshop and on the CCHA website.
- In 2005, with financial assistance from the county, a memorial plaque was erected near Haywood to mark the birthplace of Simon Green Atkins, African-American educator who started the school that became Winston-Salem State University.
- CCHA continued to maintain a good working relationship with the Chatham County Libraries. CCHA volunteers kept up the clipping and family history files housed at Wren Library, and searchable indexes for these were made available on CCHA's website.
- CCHA served as a clearinghouse for local historical information from such groups as libraries, register of deeds, and chamber of commerce as well as for hundreds of individuals with questions about family or local history.
- A close working relationship was formed during this time with the county planning office, which relied on CCHA to help identify cemetery locations and to evaluate potential historic resources on properties to be developed. Development in the northeastern part of the county was proceeding rapidly at this time. For example, thirty-seven subdivision applications were researched by CCHA volunteers in 2007 and, as a result, a number of cemeteries and old structures were documented. Volunteer Jane Pyle wrote *Historical Preservation and Development in Chatham*

County: A Guide for Developers, in 2006, to explain CCHA's interest in preserving the history of parcels to be developed.

- Thanks to Harvey Gunter, the Manly Law Office's most generous benefactor, and other volunteers, the law office received new paint, shutters, and a cedar shake roof. CCHA continued to care for the structure and open it periodically for tours.
- In 2008, Preston Development, planning a huge new development in Pittsboro called Chatham Park, requested information from CCHA aimed at making their plans sensitive to historic resources of the area. CCHA formed a working committee to draft [a report](#), which was presented to Preston in 2009.
- From 1999, when the county purchased three historic houses in Pittsboro on property to be used for a new justice center, CCHA advocated for the preservation of the structures. A CCHA representative was appointed to a committee planning the justice center in 2008. CCHA was instrumental in having the houses moved to another location within the Pittsboro historic district in 2011, and turned over to Preservation North Carolina to find new owners to preserve them.
- A CCHA representative was appointed to the Community House Task Force, convened to study how best to use the historic Community House building and how to most effectively implement needed improvements. The Task Force produced a report which prioritized a number of improvements. Subsequent renovations have improved the Community House, which continues to be a public community gathering space.
- CCHA staffed information booths at numerous local events, including the Pittsboro Street Fair, Old Orange County Family Day, Deep River Park, Jordan Lake, Chatham County Fair, Old Fashioned Days in Silk Hope, and Siler City.
- Programs with speakers on local history continued at varying intervals. Topics included the Endor iron furnace, the North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library at UNC-CH, Chatham musicians, the family of Ezekiel Hilliard, the Battle of Lindley's Mill, cleaning and preserving heirloom textiles, Milo Holt and 1939 films, Tick Creek cemetery, Haughton-McIver House, Capt. James I. Waddell and the Shenandoah, Baldwin's Mill, the Chatham rabbit, T.R. Edwards Jewelry Store, history of Gulf, Southern culture by John Shelton Reed, Frank Marsden London, newspapers in Chatham, Scottish and Quaker settlement, gravestones and cemeteries, the Dunlap brothers of Bonlee, life in a sharecropping family, Chatham County apples, Colored Confederates and US Colored troops, and the development of Fearington Village.
- In 2009, CCHA published Fred Vatter's collection of essays about Chatham County, *Tales of Fried Rabbit*.
- CCHA's website continued to advertise and document the organization's activities and increasingly became a repository for local history content as well—especially after the Chatham Historical Journal was discontinued in 2008.

- Planning for the new Chatham Community Library in Pittsboro began in 2004, and CCHA volunteers were heavily involved in developing plans for an expanded local history and genealogy section in the new library. CCHA made a major pledge of funds to the library, which the county later forgave so that the funds could be used toward the new historical museum. The new library opened in 2010.
- In 2010, during an extensive renovation, the Chatham County Courthouse burned. Some of CCHA's collection, housed in the museum in the courthouse, was damaged, but much was saved. The group invested many volunteer hours in saving items and was invited to participate in discussions about the fate of the courthouse.

2011 – 2019

- In 2011, the county decided to restore the Historic Courthouse and CCHA was allocated a large portion of the ground floor for a Chatham Historical Museum and office. 2011-2013 was a time of much work for CCHA as volunteers planned the new museum and undertook fundraising to make it happen. [The museum history](#) is documented on the CCHA website.
- As soon as the museum opened in April of 2013, the work shifted from planning and building to recruiting volunteers to serve as docents and guides in the museum, which was open three days a week from 11am to 4pm and on First Sundays and by special arrangement. In 2018, the museum had more than 3,000 visitors.
- Also in 2013, in collaboration with Chatham County Schools, CCHA began offering [field trips to the museum for 4th grade students](#) in the county. This all-volunteer run program has expanded to serve nearly all Chatham County fourth graders at no cost to the students.
- Additional repairs and upkeep of the [Manly Law Office](#) have been undertaken in this decade. To date, "Fort Snug" has been given new windows, a brick walkway, and new paint, and its chimney has been stabilized. CCHA continues to offer tours of the law office by appointment and on special occasions.
- In 2014, volunteers conducted a tour of historic Pittsboro houses as a fundraiser. Tickets for the event sold out. In 2015 a free tour of Siler City businesses and houses was held.
- In 2014, a Chatham Historical Museum Facebook page was set up and occasional posts were made for the next few years. Volunteers began scheduling almost daily posts in 2018 as an additional way to share Chatham County history and CCHA activities. The site has more than 1700 followers.

- In 2016, the Marshall log cabin, which had been constructed on land owned by Jane Pyle on Rectory Street in Pittsboro was sold by CCHA to Hobbs Architects, who had purchased the historic Lewis Freeman House from the estate of Jane Pyle. The Hobbs moved the cabin to the Lewis Freeman House property on Salisbury Street where it was renovated for use as a special office conference room.
- After several years of slower development due to an economic turndown, subdivision applications have begun to pick up again in the county. CCHA revised *Historical Preservation and Development in Chatham County: A Guide for Developers*, in 2016 and [published it on the CCHA website](#), and a volunteer continues to work with the county planning office to ensure that old structures and cemeteries are identified.
- The three historic Pittsboro houses—St. Lawrence, McClenahan, and Taylor—moved by the county at CCHA’s urging, all have found new owners and have been or are in the process of being renovated. In 2019, the Griffin-White house was purchased by a Pittsboro resident and will be moved from Chatham Park property to a private lot and renovated.
- CCHA has been involved in another preservation success. In 2012 the county purchased a 99-acre property on the west side of Pittsboro to build a new County Agriculture and Conference Center. CCHA discovered a largely intact smokehouse on that property and moved the structure to a safe location while the Ag Center was being built. Using donations and volunteer labor, the smokehouse has been reconstructed on the Ag Center property only feet from its original location, where it will serve as a reminder of Chatham’s rich agricultural history. The renovation was completed in 2019. The [smokehouse story](#) is documented on the CCHA website.
- A successful country breakfast and silent auction fundraiser to support the smokehouse renovation was held in 2017, and a country breakfast fundraiser brought in additional funds in 2018.
- As Preston Development has begun work on the massive Chatham Park development in Pittsboro, CCHA has continued to advocate for preservation of the history of the area to be disturbed and has been pleased that the developer has, thus far, followed CCHA’s recommendations. A [presentation on the first area studied](#) was presented at a CCHA program in 2017.
- CCHA continues to sponsor several programs each year on the history of the county. Since 2011, topics have included: the 26th NC Regiment at Gettysburg, life on the home front, the courthouse renovation, the War of 1812, traditional string music in Chatham County, the Civil War in the NC Quaker belt, migration patterns to and from Chatham, the Siler City Story, Mansel Philip McCleave and the student nonviolent movement, Bonlee and Bennett, preserving and repairing heirloom textiles, Chatham Park development, the Coal Glen mine disaster, the search for Jones Ferry Crossing, the Revolutionary War in NC, the Regulator movement, the

Legacy of Tar Heel Talk, Talking Black in America, and Using DNA to Break Down Genealogical Brick Walls. [Our programs are described](#) on the CCHA website.

- CCHA volunteers continue to respond to Chatham history and genealogy questions, many of which are now received via the CCHA website or Facebook page.
- CCHA volunteers continue to maintain the family history files at the Chatham Community Library. Volunteers also staff an in-person genealogy assistance service at the library one day a week and answer inquiries received by mail or email. The clipping files have not been updated since 2017, but the files and index are maintained at the library. CCHA is working with the Chatham Community Library toward having issues of the Chatham News and Record digitized to provide a searchable database.
- CCHA's cemetery survey project celebrated its 30th year in 2019. Old cemeteries have continued to be discovered and reported and burial records added to the database. Volunteers are working to photograph gravemarkers and these are added to the records on [CemeteryCensus.com](#) as they become available, preserving the record even more accurately. In 2006, CCHA had recorded 552 cemeteries. By 2012, the number was 585, and in 2018, 603 had been recorded.
- In 2017, CCHA's website was revamped to make it compatible with mobile devices and to better serve as a source of information about the organization's activities and events and as an archive of documents about Chatham County history. The CCHA Newsletter was also changed from print to an email format in 2017 and most communication with members moved to email.
- Recent acquisitions to the CCHA collection include a rabbit gum, Chatham Mills labels, family photos, a flag waved by a child when FDR passed through Pittsboro in 1938, three original Annie Bynum paintings, a photo of John Randolph Lane and Charles McConnell at Gettysburg, memorabilia and historic newspapers, a Native American artifact collection, a Revolutionary War era cannonball, and artifacts from the Farmers' Alliance Store in Siler City, which closed in 2018.
- Also in 2017, CCHA found a home for a plaque honoring Pittsboro High School students who died in WWI. The plaque had been donated to CCHA and displayed in the historical museum for a number of years, but had been in storage since the 2010 courthouse fire. The Joe Wagner VFW post now houses the plaque. See more in our [3Q2017 Newsletter](#).
- In 2019, the Chatham Historical Museum was awarded a North Carolina Society of Historians Award for the valuable contributions made toward the collection, preservation, and perpetuation of North Carolina history. The judges unanimously commended the officers, directors, members, volunteers, and visitors of the Museum for their foresight, hard work and dedication to preserving Chatham County history.

CCHA's Ongoing Projects

- Chatham Historical Museum Tours
- 4th Grade Field Trips
- Museum Acquisitions
- Chatham Cemetery Survey
- Digitization Projects
 - CCHA's Photo Collection
 - Chatham High School Yearbooks (with Chatham Co. Public Libraries)
 - African-American Funeral Programs
- Programs
- Preservation Efforts
- Manly Law Office
- Publications, Website, Facebook
- Genealogy Assistance
- Outreach at County Events
- Planning for Chatham's 250th Anniversary

Sources:

Some Notes Concerning the Chatham County Historical Society...And Related Subjects, by Wade H. Hadley, Jr. 21 Sep 1987.

The Chatham County Historical Association, Inc., by Jane Pyle, 2007.

[CCHA Newsletters online.](#)

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