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The Post Offices of Chatham County, N.C.

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One hundred years ago, in 1891, there were sixty-one post offices within Chatham County, each with a duly appointed postmaster. Today there are nine U.S. post offices within the county.

The U. S. Post Office came into existence soon after the Constitution was adopted in 1789. Its mission was to establish post offices and post roads. By 1794 there was a post office within Chatham County. In August of that year, Michael Sperlock was appointed Deputy Postmaster for the Chatham Courthouse Post Office. It was served by a thirty-eight-mile postal route from Raleigh to Hillsborough by way of Chapel Hill and Chatham Courthouse.

By 1800, North Carolina had sixty-one counties with post offices. The service at that time was confined mainly to county seat towns. During the early 1800s, rural post offices were being established at small communities throughout Chatham County. Burr's map of 1839 shows the location of twenty post offices within the county and the roads that served them.

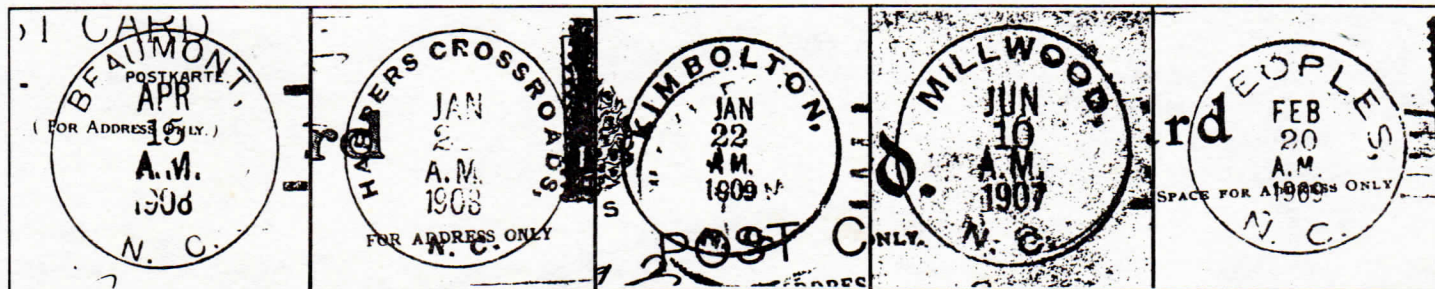
The number of these rural post offices peaked in the late 1800s. Some of them existed for long periods of time, up to seventy years and more. There was a post office at Haywood over a period of 135 years, first as Haywoodsborough from 1802 to 1827

and then as Haywood from 1827 to 1937. Some post offices existed for only a few years. The cumulative number of post offices established within the county over the years is around 107.

The rural post offices were located at country stores, mills, crossroads, and other settlements. Each served the people living within a radius of several miles. Some post offices bore practical names, such as Riggsbee's Store, Hadley's Mills, Emerson's Tan Yard, Hackney's Crossroads, and Ore Hill. Others had fanciful names, such as Energy, Frosty, Pluck, Stork, and Truth. In some instances the post office at a specific site had two or more names with the passing of time. For example, Energy (1880 - 1884) became Siler Station (1884 - 1886), and finally Siler City (1886 to the present).

Postmarks from five discontinued Chatham County post offices are shown below. Beaumont, active from 1851 to 1914, was located about seven miles southwest of Pittsboro near Rocky River and Greene's Mill; Harpers Crossroads, active from 1871 to 1918, is located in the southwestern portion of the county; Kimbolton, active 1859 - 1923, was located about seven miles east of Siler City; Millwood, active 1883 - 1914, was located on the north side of the Rocky River where SR 1506 turns north; and Peoples, active from 1882 to 1914, was located about six miles southwest of Pittsboro near the Rocky River.

Rural Free Delivery (RFD) mail service was initiated in North Carolina in 1896 and in Chatham County in 1898, thus bringing the mail to a box for each family along the route. This led to the gradual



decline and ultimate extinction of the traditional rural post office. The peak period of decline of rural post offices within Chatham was from 1903 to 1916, when fifty of them were discontinued. New post offices continued to be established within the county well into the 1900s, however. The last one appears to have been Wells, opened in 1913 and closed in 1921. Wells was a settlement located about four and a half miles east of Bennett, in Bear Creek township, and on the line of the Bonlee and Western Railway.

The last post offices within the county to be discontinued, in 1956, were Corinth, Merry Oaks, and Mount Vernon Springs. The remaining nine post offices, which survived because they were established at settlements that were viable and continue as villages or towns, are Bear Creek (Richmond P.O., 1884 - 1900), Bennett (Boaz P. O., 1888 - 1910), Bonlee (Causey P. O., 1878 - 1910), Bynum (Bynum's P. O., 1879 - 1890), Goldston (since 1889), Gulf (Gulph or The Gulph P. O., 1828 - 1860), Moncure (since 1877), Pittsboro (Chatham Courthouse P. O., 1794 - 1819, Pittsborough P.O., 1819 - 1893), and Siler City (Energy P. O., 1880 - 1884, Siler Station P. O., 1884 - 1886).

The communities around many of the former rural post offices have now disappeared or lost their identity, for example, Millwood, Mud Lick, Rosewood, Underwood's Store, and Wells. A few communities that once had post offices have maintained their identity, but without post offices, for example, Harper's Crossroads, Merry Oaks, and Mount Vernon Springs.

The post offices of Chatham are a valid and interesting subject pertaining to the history of the county. This is especially true of the approximately one hundred post offices that once served their respective communities and are now gone.

NOTES

Sources of data on Chatham County post offices are:

The **Chatham Historical Journal** is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Its purpose is to disseminate items of historical interest about Chatham County. Material, which should be previously unpublished, may include photographs, private papers, church or organization records, monographs, or letters. Items should be of reasonable length and should include sources of information.

Back issues are available while they last: Vol. 1 (1988, No. 1, 2), \$2.00; Vol. 2 (1989, No. 1, 2), \$2.00; Vol. 3 (1990, No. 1, 2), \$5.00; Vol. 4 (1991, No. 1 - 4), \$5.00. Correspondence should be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, Box 913, Pittsboro, N.C. 27312.

1. *Records of Appointments of Postmasters 1780-1971*. Post Office Department, Washington, D.C. [These records are available on microfilm in libraries including the North Carolina collection at Wilson Library, UNC-CH. In addition to a list of postmasters and date of their appointment at each post office, there is information as to when post offices were discontinued, or moved, and revisions or changes in the name.]

2. David H. Burr's *Map of North Carolina and South Carolina, exhibiting post offices, post roads, etc.*; Washington, D.C. 1839. [This map shows location of 20 post offices within Chatham County and the roads that served them.]

3. *Post Route Map, 1896*, North Carolina and South Carolina, as of June, 1896; published by order of Postmaster General.

4. *Stout's Historical Research Map, Chatham County, 1986*. [An accompanying booklet dated August 19, 1987, lists the post offices under place names and gives their coordinates on the map.]

5. *Chatham Record*, 3 August 1882 [lists 39 post offices] and 25 June 1891 [lists 60 post offices]

From Pittsboro to Paris, 1876 - 1945

Frank Marsden London, Artist

Bonnie Vargo and
Anne Lazenby Williams

In 1923 the firm Montague Castle-London Company dissolved. Frank London, now 47, turned full attention to his passion, painting, to which he devoted his artistic energies until his death in March 1945. Asked during this period about earlier stained glass creations, London rebuffed the questioner with, "I am now a painter!" His passion took him to Europe a number of times before the Great Depression, and he and his family lived in Paris for two years during the mid-twenties.

It was an explosive time for the arts in Paris. Cubism, Classicism, Art Deco, and Surrealism were shaping the course of twentieth-century art, and London used a lavishly-furnished studio earlier occupied by the sculptor, Rodin. He searched local flea markets for exotic objects to use as models for his still lifes. A lantern purchased on one of these excursions later lit the entrance hall of his 48th Street brownstone in New York City and now hangs in the sanctuary of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Pittsboro, North Carolina.

During the 1920s, London exhibited works with the Whitney Studio Club, of which he was an original member, and the Woodstock and Montross Galleries, all in New York. His first one-man show came in the mid-twenties at Montross Gallery. It included Italian and French landscapes, scenes from Greenwich Village, and still lifes, primarily of

flowers. In this early stage of development as a "full-time" painter, one critic hailed London as a painter "who carries his joy of painting over to the observer." However, the same critic went on to use descriptions of London as "a businessman who passed a year in Paris and who would probably return after his paintings sold."¹

Frank London did return to Paris, exhibiting still lifes, portraits, and landscapes at a one-man show in 1927. He also was awarded the Diplome D'Honneur at the International Exposition of Beaux Arts in Bordeaux this same year.

He returned to New York City, purchasing a home on 51st Street. After the 1929 stock market crash and ensuing economic hard times, London's trips to Europe ceased.

During the mid-twenties, London began spending summers in Woodstock, where he eventually became a vital part of the art community. He joined the second wave of Woodstock artists, arriving during the time the first generation of Woodstock artists worked at integrating the influences of Cezanne and the Cubists. This second group, later called "the Woodstock School," was distinct in their choices of subjects -- Woodstock landscapes, people, and flowers -- and in the use of somber, earthy colors. They were characterized as serious people with a strong desire to create a truly American approach to painting, one which compromised between European innovations and American tradition, while committed to the constant exploration of life and reality.

While London's canvasses may have reflected a somber mood, life in Woodstock was anything but sober. London and his family frequented parties and costume balls where friends enjoyed his outspoken manner, quick wit, and charm. He continued to visit local auctions and flea markets, furnishing his Woodstock home, purchased in 1930, not only with family antiques but also with such oddities as a rose-colored train seat. He excelled in still-life painting during this era, often using Victorian decorative objects found at Woodstock auctions,

working in both oils and watercolor. Reviewers described works during this period as "modernist" in attitude and "realist," sometimes "primitive" in style.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, London continued work from his New York City studio and his summer residence in Woodstock. Exhibitions were held at the Montross and Woodstock Galleries, and London's paintings were featured in shows of the Carnegie International Paintings Collection housed in Philadelphia, in the Corcoran Museum in Washington, D.C., and in the Toledo Museum of Art,

among others. Also in the 1940s, London's paintings made their first appearance in North Carolina, through exhibitions at museums in Chapel Hill, Charlotte, and Raleigh. During this period he became a member of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors.

London began to experiment with more abstract styles of painting, evident in several of his still lifes.

Critics praised his paintings, noting that his palette was brighter, fresher, and his compositions more complicated, yet balanced with strong lines, interesting applications of paint, and masterful treatment of the smallest detail. Rare color and design typified his works. Some critics described his still lifes as sinister, while others found them witty. Pictured were startling collections of objects: butterflies alighting on dead tree limbs, joined by cut flowers,

overturned vases, draped fabric, and birds, all resting on a Victorian period chair or a pitcher overturned on a table on which lay a pine bough nestling bird eggs and from which a pitcher hung suspended by a rope. These scenes are reminiscent of certain Dutch Baroque painters who dealt with themes of death and transience through still life painting. In a single life that spanned Reconstruction in the South through the Great Depression and two world wars, that experienced technological leaps in travel, communication, and industrial development, and that included the agony of his first child's death, Frank London became well acquainted with social upheaval, rapid change, and



"Time," oil on canvas, 32" x 50", 1940
Greenville County Museum, South Carolina

loss. It is no wonder that his paintings suggest paradoxical themes of birth and death, time arrested and processing, and glory both present and passing.

London's contemporary and friend Bradley Tomlin observed that "beneath this odd collection of paradoxical elements" lies a "view of life which is deeply reflective," translating the events of his times into the "elegant decay" seen on his canvas. Tomlin posited that although London would have probably denied this perception, the South "still imposed an emotional motivation upon Frank London's paintings."²

London made another contribution to art before his death in 1945, but as a peacemaker rather than as a painter. The fragmentation into separate ethnic, political, and philosophical camps during the World War II era was paralleled by schism within the Woodstock Artists Association, of which London was a part. Recent arrivals to the artistic community expressed avant-garde attitudes, threatening the more conservative traditional approaches held as legitimate by the "old guard" of Woodstock artists. London was one of a committee of seven who negotiated between various interests to embrace philosophical differences, to chart the future course of the organization, and to develop solutions permitting various artists and craftpersons access to the Woodstock Gallery.

Following his death in March 1945, the Woodstock Gallery held a retrospective showing of London's still lifes, an exhibition which led one local art critic to comment that "no more beautiful collection by one man has ever been shown in the Woodstock Gallery.... [London] paints an old drum stove so that one has a feeling of compassion for a discarded friend."³ London's paintings also traveled back to the South in 1948, first shown in the Wesleyan Art Gallery in Macon, Georgia. In early 1949 the paintings were exhibited first in the State Art Gallery in Raleigh and then in the Mint Museum in Charlotte.

In 1967 his paintings were shown at The Contemporaries Gallery in New York

City, and in 1974 they were exhibited at the William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut. A revival of interest in London's paintings brought an exhibition of still lifes to North Carolina in 1989 and 1990.

Several of Frank London's paintings can be found with the London family in North and South Carolina and at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, the Hobson Pittman Memorial Gallery in Tarboro, the St. John's Museum of Art in Wilmington, and the Chatham County Historical Museum in Pittsboro, North Carolina. Most of the remainder of his paintings are with London's son, Marsden, in Darien, Connecticut.

(This is the second part of a two-part article.)

NOTES

1. Clipping with notation "The New Yorker [1925]," Frank Marsden London files, Woodstock Artists Association Archives, Woodstock, New York.
2. Bradley Tomlin, *Frank London, A Retrospective Showing of His Paintings* (Woodstock, New York, September 1948).
3. Clipping with notation "from Kingston, N.Y. Freeman, September 16, 1948," Frank Marsden London files, *op. cit.*

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"The Chestnut Tree," oil on canvas, 32" x 43 1/2", 1931

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