

PROGRAM DISCUSSES HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND CHATHAM PARK

The pews of the historic Chatham County Courthouse were filled on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in February by county residents interested in how Chatham Park will impact historical resources in the county. The February 19 program was sponsored by the Chatham County Historical Association. Speaking was Paul Webb, an archaeologist with TRC Environmental Corporation, who has been hired by Chatham Park to coordinate their historical preservation efforts.

Webb noted that, although it may seem surprising given its size, Chatham Park does not have federal or state permit requirements that might trigger historic preservation work. Except for cemeteries, which are protected by state statues, the historic resources on the Chatham Park property have no legal or regulatory protection under federal or state laws. "Developers are usually juggling a whole host of other permitting concerns, and it's very understandable that they tend to focus their energy and resources on what's absolutely necessary for their project. Chatham Park has evolved somewhat differently, however, which I think is a tribute to the CCHA, the Town of Pittsboro, and the folks at Chatham Park," Webb said.

Early in the planning process, the Historical Association and others expressed their concern about Chatham Park's potential effect on historic resources. In 2008, the Association produced a preliminary historical assessment of Chatham Park, which documented some of the resources that were present within the development area. The report also laid out recommendations for historic properties studies and the development of a local history of Chatham Park.

Webb explained that CCHA's recommendations emphasized local history and getting the information into the hands of the local community. In response to these concerns, Chatham Park has agreed to conduct historic studies for individual sections prior to their development. Webb has recently completed the first of these studies on a 200+-acre parcel northeast of the intersection of Firetower Road and Thompson Street northeast of Pittsboro.

Most of the resources Webb's team found relate to the early through mid-20th century use of the property. One of the sites Webb described is the remains of the Fred and Nannie Knight farm, which was occupied into the 1990s, and later burned. "If you look at it on the ground you may not think there is much of a story here," Webb said. "We're able to flesh out this story through historic research, however, and additional oral history interviews can probably provide even more information."

A 1965 aerial photograph shows the layout of this property, including the farmhouse surrounded by barns and other outbuildings. The house was photographed in 1982 during the Chatham County architectural survey, which also recorded some crucial information concerning the house's construction by Fred Knight about 1920.

Deeds and newspaper articles tell even more about the Knight family, including that most of the surrounding land was acquired by Fred Knight's mother, Eliza Merritt Knight, from the Foushee family descendants in the early 1900s. Webb asked the audience for any information they might have about the Knight family, indicating that such information will be added to his report to help fill out the local history of the area.

Webb also discussed the two old road traces found on the property. He noted that highway 64 hasn't always been the road from Pittsboro to Raleigh. For most of the first half of the 20th century, the main route east from town was along Thompson Street, leaving Pittsboro at the north end of downtown.

"But what you may not realize is that Thompson Street itself is a reworking of the original Raleigh Road, which followed a more circuitous course that wove its way through the countryside east of Pittsboro. That road shows clearly on the 1938 aerial photograph, the 1965 map, and parts of this route can still be followed on Google Earth today," Webb said.

A 1916 Chatham Record article discussed the pros and cons of the new road versus the rocks and gullies of the old road, suggesting that most of the old road was probably abandoned about that time. Part of the Old Raleigh Road is still visible in the woods along the south side of Chatham Park.

Webb also discussed the old road to Redfield Ford, which was on the Haw River just below Bynum. That road was likely abandoned soon after the 1940s, but is still there in the woods, forming a boundary of Chatham Park's property.

Webb concluded that his research is work in progress. "In a sense initial research is the easy part; the next challenges are to flesh this out with oral history and memories, and find ways to preserve and present these data so that they can be useful to you and others. In that regard, I'd appreciate any information any of you might have concerning any of the resources we discussed today, or other resources that might be located elsewhere on Chatham Park."

"While it differs in scale, Chatham Park is only the latest in a long history of different land-uses in this part of the county," Webb said. "It will bring many new people to this area, but these people too will become residents of Pittsboro and Chatham County, and I think it's important that we give them a sense of place and of the history of their community. I think the value of this work will only grow as we look at additional areas, and begin to understand the history of settlement over an increasingly larger area."