

# A Brief History of the Schools of Chatham County

by Jane Pyle

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Tarpin Slide School

*Just what were the country schools like . . . 70 years ago [1820]? The first one I attended was a small one-room schoolhouse—so small, in fact, that as I look at a picture of it now I hardly see how 30 or 40 students squeezed into it each day. . . . Mostly we were taught spelling and the Three R's . . . There were no “grades” and the same pupil might be studying at the same time subjects that would now be taught in the third, fifth, and eighth grades. . . .*

*-Dr. Clarence Poe,  
My First Eighty Years*

## Schools of Chatham County

The history of education in Chatham County is covered in considerable detail in *Chatham County, 1771-1971*, starting with private academies and ending just before integration of the public schools. This article is intended to be an overview of the subject, illustrated with photographs from scattered sources, and covers much the same period of time.

## Academies and Early Public Schools

Roy E. Cole, in an article published in the *Chatham Record* of 2 June 1922 entitled “A Chatham Education,” remarks, “An academy in our pioneer days of education answered for the same purpose that a high school does today.” Chatham’s first and best-known academy was the Pittsborough Academy, established by state charter in 1787, with the name persisting into the twentieth century. Other academies were begun at Haywood (1818), Rock Rest (1828, moved to Pittsborough in 1831 and called Kelvin), Tick Creek (1832, later Caldwell), Pleasant Hill (1838), and Cobia’s Select Female School (1839) near Pittsboro.

Public education in Chatham County began in 1839 with a local vote approving the recently-enacted common school law and setting up thirty-five districts. Public or common schools typically had one teacher, met for only five months, and taught only the three Rs. The number of districts increased, and by 1864 there were 65 school committees; however, after the Civil War most schools closed and in 1870 a report told of only two or three schools with twenty teachers examined by the county board. Oral tradition says that the first African-American school may have been started as early as 1853; the first deed recorded for a non-white school was in 1869, for Haywood. A dual system of districts was established and 48 white and 24 Negro schools were reported in 1873.

Academies continued to offer a wider range and higher levels of coursework than did the common schools. New academies were added to serve the dispersed population: New Hope and Mt. Vernon Springs in 1855; Tyson's Creek, 1861; Wilson, 1864; Locust Hill and Pittsboro Scientific Academy in 1866. Still later, Moncure, Merry Oaks, Osgood, Goldston, and Thompson [Military] School, later Siler City Institute, were chartered, several of which became public schools in later years.

After the 1900 election of Gov. Charles B. Aycock and appointment of James Y. Joyner as Superintendent of Public Instruction, public education began to improve in North Carolina, at least for the white population. In Pittsboro a school was built on Hillsboro Street and opened in 1908. As Letson Nooe recalled, "Twas a monstrous two-story white building that had rooms enough to accommodate all grades with an auditorium and stage, music room, library, and everything." When the time came, he moved from "Miss Ida's room downstairs to the two high school rooms."

Local communities formed "betterment associations" to support public schools, and some of these grew to include secondary education. The *Chatham Record* carried news about Goldston Academy, Merry Oaks High School, Silk Hope, Moncure Academy, Mt. Vernon Academy, Pittsboro Academy, and the Thompson School in Siler City. Bonlee High School, founded as a private institution in 1913, was taken into the public system in 1917. Its physical plant included a two-story building that included an auditorium seating 500 and a 20-room dormitory.

In 1916, twelve schools (all white) taught at least some high school subjects. By 1919 sixteen schools taught some high school subjects and eight teachers taught exclusively at this level. During this period the state department of public instruction was strengthened and school districts were allowed to levy special taxes in support of schools. Moncure was one of several districts voting to incur the special tax.

## **Consolidation**

In the early 1920s Chatham's Board of Education began to eliminate its many one-room schoolhouses, to erect new buildings, and to truck older students to larger schools. (Buses were not introduced until later.) In 1924 a countywide plan was developed to rationalize the locations of schools offering secondary education. As a result Bell's,

Bonlee, Goldston, Moncure, Pittsboro, and Siler City were called high schools, although in fact they included grades one through eleven. (The twelfth grade was not added until 1941.) Bennett, Bynum, and Silk Hope were designated elementary schools, but they continued to offer secondary classes and hence were called union schools. In a large, rural county, the union school remained the framework for twenty-five years, with only Pittsboro and Siler City able to support schools solely for grades beyond the eighth.

By the end of the school year in 1925 the number of white high schools had been reduced to eight, but there was still no high school provided for the African-American community. Denied access to literacy during slavery, disenfranchised after 1900, and their schools underfunded, the disparity in funding between the two systems was high. Although some secondary courses were taught as early as 1930, black students had to move outside Chatham to receive a high school education.

Chatham County School Statistics	White	Negro
1923-1924		
Number of schools	65	41
Number of schools with high school courses	15	0
Number of trucks	15	0
1929-1930		
Number of schools	41	43
Number of high school units; number of students	8; 626	0; 0
Number of libraries; number of volumes	10; 4,400	0; 0
Number of trucks	43	0
1934-1935		
Number of schoolhouses; number made of brick	11; 11	42; 2
Number of high schools; number of students	8; 1,063	2; 250
Number of libraries; number of volumes	8; 4,903	2; 218
Number of trucks	47	2
1937-1938		
Number of schoolhouses; number made of brick	11; 11	39; 3
Number of high school units; number of students	8; 1,045	3; 423
Number of libraries; number of volumes	8; 5,000	3; 902
Number of trucks	47	5

Source: *Chatham County 1771-1971; Statistical reports of county superintendent*

In the early 1930s the schools were placed under state control, meaning a loss in autonomy but an increase in funding, especially for school construction, and in 1931 bids were opened for construction of Siler City colored (\$10,000), Silk Hope, Bell's, Goldston, Bonlee (\$20,975), and Bennett.

<b>Capital Outlays,</b>	<b>Chatham County</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Negro</b>
New building	1926-1928	\$10,894	\$ 2,368
	1928-1930	3,791	1,164
	1930-1932	123,192	16,662
	1932-1934	11,818	399
Special building (e.g., gymnasium, agriculture)			
	1928-1930	\$14,494	0
	1930-1932	25,031	0
Furniture and equipment			
	1928-1930	\$ 4,732	0
	1930-1932	0	0
	1932-1934	4,219	35

Source: Financial Reports, Superintendent of Schools, Chatham County

Northern charitable foundations provided funds to improve African-American education in the South, notably from Julius Rosenwald of Sears-Roebuck & Co. Ten Chatham schools have been identified as having received Rosenwald funds.

The North Carolina General Assembly greatly increased appropriations for public schools in 1941, especially for vocational education, and a constitutional amendment established a State Board of Education. A statewide school bond earmarked \$25 million to build or repair public school buildings, and Chatham County schools added vocational buildings, agricultural departments, lunchrooms, and gymnasiums.

“Didn’t anyone know there was a war going on?” Only a few references to World War II appear in the county school board minutes: wood stoves were being replaced by coal stoves because of a labor shortage and the cost of wood; the War Production Board requested one-fourth of the inventory of typewriters from business departments; and schools were put on short schedules in 1943-44 to free pupils for farm work.

## Postwar Growth and Integration

After the war, consolidation again became an issue as state standards in 1946 required a school to have at least three high school teachers and sixty high school students to retain their high school departments. At the time Moncure had 40 students, Bell's 45, and Silk Hope 43; however, the county school board defended its union schools and their arguments prevailed for a time. In 1949 a state-approved building program costing \$409,000 included new schools for Bell's, Horton, Moncure School, 1940s Chatham County Training School (in Siler City, soon to be named Chatham High School), and other projects. Bids were opened for a new high school in Siler City in 1951, a new high school in Pittsboro in 1952, and a new black high school in Goldston in 1953.

In 1954 the Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education caused but a brief disturbance, and the *Chatham Record* reported that no change was expected in the 1954-55 school year. In fact, no change in racial separation occurred for over ten more years.

Consolidation seemed much more of an issue: Bell's was joined to Pittsboro, Goldston and Bonlee formed Central High School in Bear Creek, with fourteen classrooms and a fully-equipped commercial department, but Moncure was retained in an entirely new plant. Silk Hope threatened to vote against school bonds because their request for an agriculture building was denied. In 1959 state school bond funds were earmarked for Pittsboro primary, J. S. Waters gymnasium, and the agriculture building in Silk Hope. Later, school bonds were proposed for new buildings for the three African-American high schools, Horton, Chatham, and J. S. Waters. In 1963 a survey of schools by a state committee found that several of the high schools were "entirely too small to provide acceptable programs at a reasonable cost," suggested further consolidation, and recommended that black schools be given the highest priority for improvements. Contracts were let for shop buildings at Horton and Chatham after the survey showed only three vocational education teachers for 275 pupils at Chatham Central; no teachers at Chatham High School, J. S. Waters, or Bennett; and only one home economics teacher for 304 pupils at Horton.

After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and, more importantly, following legislation providing that federal funding was dependent upon acceptable plans for the elimination of dual school systems, change came fairly rapidly. Chatham's first "Freedom of Choice" plan was filed in April and results were announced in June. At the high school level, six black students were assigned to Jordan-Matthews, three chose Chatham Central, and twenty-five selected Pittsboro High School. The "Freedom of Choice" plan continued for two more years with little advance toward integration, and in late 1967 the county was placed on a "deferred" list, which meant that it could no longer buy federal surplus goods for lunchrooms. At a hearing in Washington, the school board was told that the county could forego federal funds but that total integration would have to occur within two or three years. Federal funds were reinstated after an 11-point plan was approved in mid-February 1968.

This plan provided for consolidation of J. S. Waters (in Goldston) with Chatham Central, assignment of the eighth grade at Chatham High to Jordan-Matthews, continuation of “Freedom of Choice” elsewhere, and the assignment of full-time faculty across racial lines. In August the *Chatham Record* reported that over 600 black students would be attending formerly all-white schools and that teachers would be attending workshops on racial attitudes.

The following year, 1968-1969, three school zones were set. Chatham High and Jordan-Matthews were merged, and total integration was to occur at several grade levels in Siler City as well as in Bonlee, Bennett, and Silk Hope. A county student council composed of five delegates from each of the four high schools in the county met monthly at a different school.

To facilitate the merger of Horton and Pittsboro High schools, a committee was established representing students, parents, and faculty from each school. Among decisions to be made were school colors and a school mascot. Similar committees met in Siler City and Goldston.

A \$3.6 million bond issue in 1969 passed by a wide margin to build a new school in Pittsboro and additions at the other high schools. By fall Northwood High School was under construction, but the county’s integration plan for 1969-1970 was disallowed because Pittsboro and Horton were still not integrated. School opened after integration was effected by placing grades 10 to 12, with 601 students and 31 faculty, at Pittsboro High School, while grades 5 through 9, with 880 students and 33 faculty, went to Horton School. By fall 1970 the Chatham County schools were fully integrated, with three high schools, two middle schools, three elementary schools, and the four remaining former union schools in Bennett, Bonlee, Goldston, Silk Hope, and Moncure with grades 1-8. By 2008 everything had grown larger—general population, school population, budgets, number of teachers, and number of buses. In the part of the county experiencing the greatest growth, two new elementary schools were built and a fourth high school has been approved as well.

Summing up the first 200 years of education in Chatham County, the compilers of *Chatham County, 1771-1971* concluded, “A strong foundation has been laid for continued improvement of public education in the county,” still true 38 years later.

### **Sources**

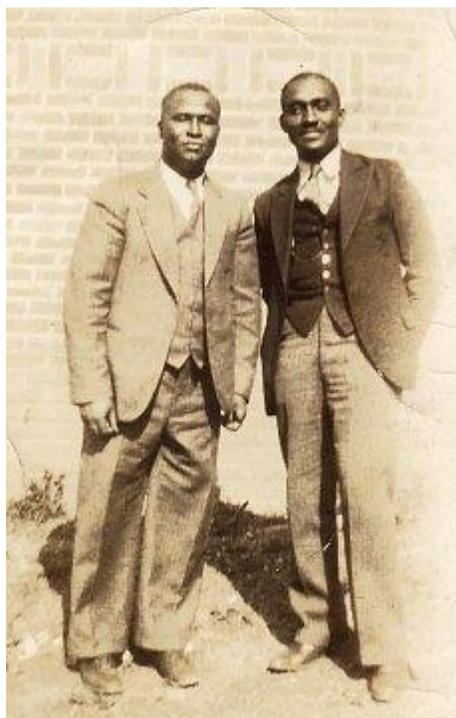
The history of education in Chatham County is covered in considerable detail in *Chatham County, 1771-1971*, and was used freely for this article. In addition, minutes of the Chatham County Board of Education, the *Chatham Record*, interviews, and materials in the North Carolina Archives were used. A full list of sources will be provided by inquiry to the Chatham County Historical Association, PO Box 93, Pittsboro, NC 27312.

## Photo Credits

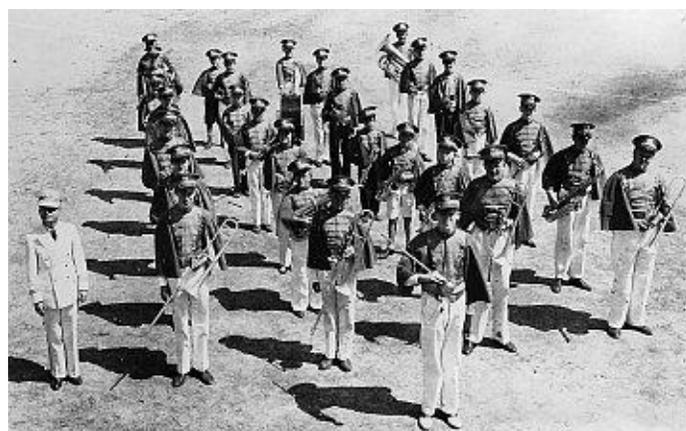
Photos or other illustrations, if not credited in the caption, are in the Chatham Historical Museum or CCHA historical files in Wren Memorial Library, Siler City.



Silk Hope football team, 1931



Benjamin J. Lee and teacher, Horton School,  
date unknown



Siler City High School band 1940s

Record of *Frank London*  
For the week ending *Feb. 19 1892*

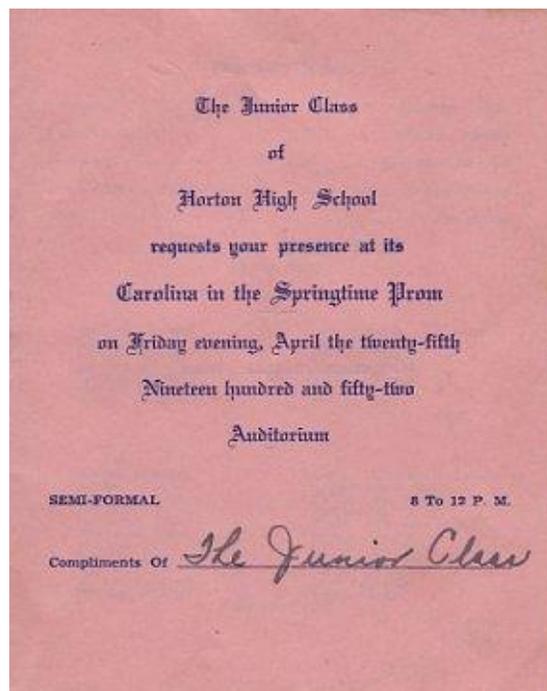
	10. EXCELLENT	9. VERY GOOD	8. GOOD	7. INDIFFERENT & FAILURE	Present.	Spelling.	Reading.	Penmanship.	Inst. Arith.	Pract. Arith.	Algebra.	Geometry.	Trigonometry.	Book Keeping.	Orthography.	Philosophy.	Religion.	Physical Science.	English.	Book to Class.	
Monday		9	10					9	10	9											
Tuesday		10	10					9	10	9											
Wednesday		10	10					7	9	10											
Thursday		10	10					7	9	9											
Friday		10	10					-	10	9											
Saturday																					

*Sam'l J. Jackson* Teacher. *W. H. H. on class* Parent.

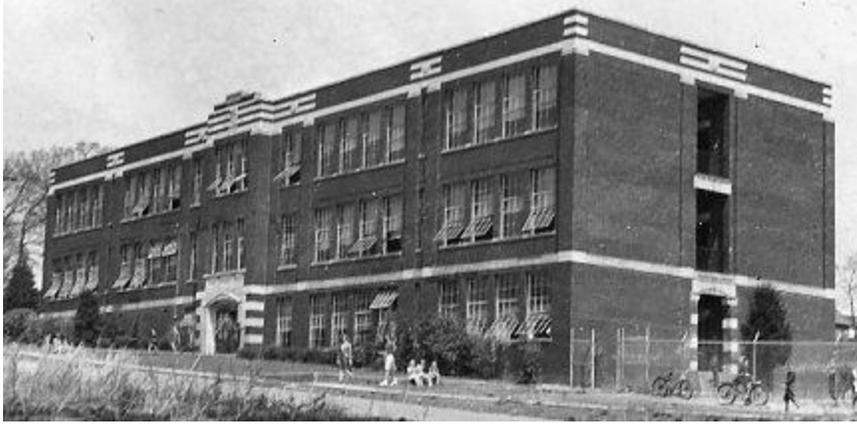
London Report Card, 1892



Hickory Mountain School



Horton High School Prom Invitation



Siler City High School, 1922

School opened with prospects bright for good year.  
School closed during October on account of Influenza  
the attendance was small during November, was  
better in December. The outlook was very good at  
the opening in January. Influenza broke out  
on seventh day of school and we had to close.  
We lost another month and decided it was not  
safe to reopen.

Excerpt from Bonlee principal's report, 1919  
It reads: "School opened with prospects bright for good year.  
School closed during October on account of Influenza,  
the attendance was small during November, was  
better in December. The outlook was very good at  
the opening in January. Influenza broke out  
on seventh day of school and we had to close.  
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