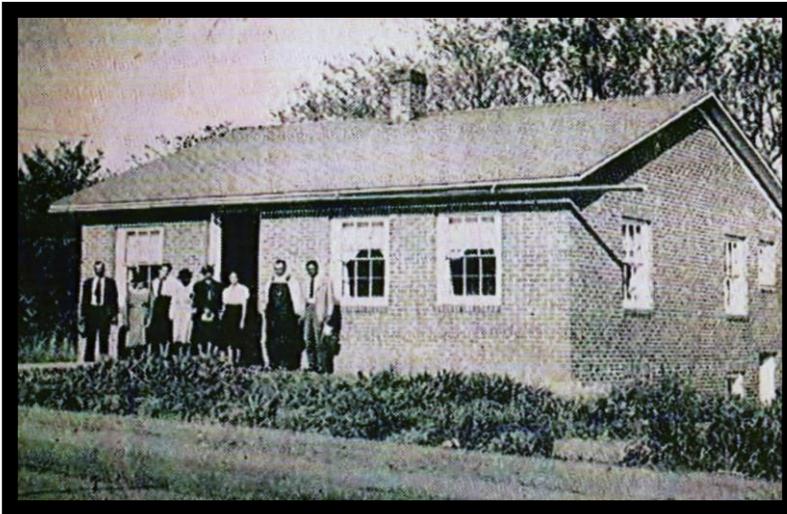


# A Brief History of the Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair\*

*\*Now the Chatham County Agricultural and Industrial Fair*

The Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair has its roots in the strictly segregated Chatham County of the 1940s. The Black community recognized the need to improve the health of Black people in the county and decided that the best approach in rural Chatham would be to help farmers and homemakers better provide for their families. Failing to gain support from white county leaders for a farm agent for the Black community, a group of leaders reached out to the Agricultural Extension Service at NC State and were promised salaries for a Black farm agent, a home extension agent and a part-time secretary.

The group recruited qualified applicants for these positions, but received no support from the county for office space. Again, the Black community persisted. In 1946, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Gade Bryant of Moncure donated a parcel of land in Pittsboro for the erection of an office building to house Farm and Home Agents for the Black people of Chatham County. Money



*"Negro citizens of Chatham County raised \$5,000 to build an office building at Pittsboro for their home and farm agents and their doctor. This is also the headquarters for the Negro citizens' Farm and Home Organization, a prime objective of which is 'health.'  
1947 photo courtesy of Chatham County Cooperative Extension Service.*

was raised by donations from the Black community and the building was dedicated in June of 1947. Newspapers at the time hailed the building as the "first known Negro Agricultural building ever to be erected in any county of the United States from solicited funds."

The Farm and Home Organization, of which Mr. Bryant was president, held monthly meetings at the office building. It was out of this organization that the Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair came into existence.

Mildred Bright Payton came to Chatham to fill the position of Chatham County Negro Home Demonstration Agent, in 1947. As the county's Black home economics agent, she was responsible for working with Home Demonstration Clubs and 4-H Clubs which had long participated in an annual "Achievement Day."

Achievement Day offered a chance for people to display their talent at household arts and to receive prizes for their work. Ms. Payton promoted the idea for a carnival and county fair to be held annually, with the proceeds being used to help fund the prizes for the Achievement Day. At first, despite enthusiasm by the Home Demonstration Clubs, many in the Farm and Home Organization felt the idea too ambitious. Ms. Payton eventually prevailed, and in May 1949, the Farm and Home Organization voted in favor of the county fair.

The first Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair was held in 1950 on the rented grounds of the Goldston Lumber Company. Volunteers worked hard to prepare the site. A carnival was engaged – the first that many Black children had ever seen. Though plagued by mud, rain and a leaky rented tent, the event attracted about three thousand and was considered a great success. Many of the outstanding agricultural exhibits went on to good showings at the State Fair.

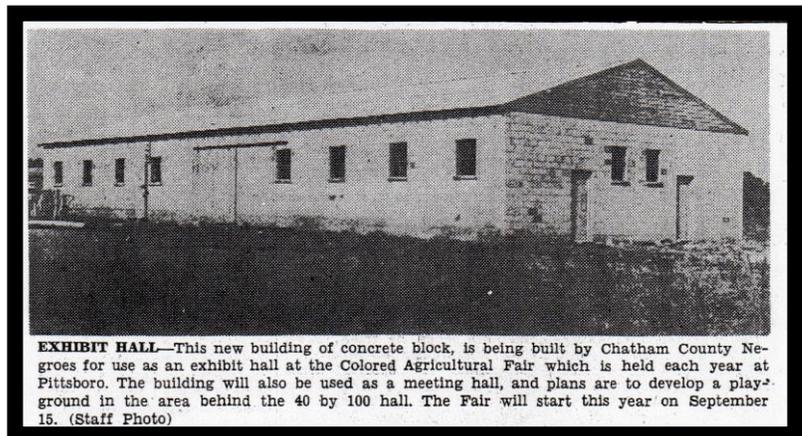


*Chatham County 4-H club members show their calves at a Greensboro competition. Photo courtesy of Chatham County Cooperative Extension Service.*

In 1951, the second fair was held on a new tract of land offered to the Fair Association—rent-free—by Pittsboro Mayor J.A. Farrell, Sr. Again, a rented tent was used, but the location and weather proved more hospitable. Some 500 Fair "catalogs" containing an extensive premium list and listing 81 advertisers and 22 additional patrons were made and circulated in Chatham and adjoining counties. More than one hundred exhibitors displayed their work, including canned and baked goods, clothing, needlework, and horticultural products, for an estimated seven thousand guests.

By 1952, the year of the third fair, the land was purchased from Mayor Farrell for one thousand dollars, with funds raised by sixteen Black home demonstration clubs in the county.

Before the 1953 fair, a 100' x 40' concrete block exhibit hall was constructed on the fair property. Again, the Home Demonstration Clubs raised some of the \$5,000 for the project and many in the county donated labor. Mayor Farrell helped to clear the land. The 1953 fair was the first to the exhibit hall to house fair exhibits.



*Chatham Record, 5 Sept 1952*

Ms. Anne McCrimmon, a former member and officer of the Fair Board captures the significance of the early fairs in her remembrance of attending as a child:

*One of the [segregated Horton] School's activities for its students included a day to attend the Fair when it opened. Students could follow a path through the woods that lead to a rickety little foot bridge across Robertson Creek to the fairgrounds. Even today I can remember the apprehension I would feel by the time we'd reach the creek. But I never fell in nor did I pass out from the fear that lay so heavy in my chest as my turn to cross over approached. Only the prospects of the Fair made it worth the effort to*

*dash over. All kinds of handmade items would be on display. Hand-embroidered pillow cases, crocheted and knitted doilies for chairs, tables and anything else they could be placed on. Food, food, food would abound! Not just the luscious homegrown vegetables and fruit, and all kinds of canned goods, baked pies and cakes. This stuff was for looking at. The real food for fair goers would be outside the Exhibit Hall, hot dogs, candied apples, taffy, popcorn balls, candy, cookies, roasted peanuts in the shell and wonderful ice cream!. We never had enough money to sample all we wanted but if your buddies were true, you could get a little pinched share of many things. The Fair turned an ordinary school day into a grand holiday!*



*Pageant contestants... "All contestants in the recent Chatham County Fair Pageant were awarded crowns, trophies, certificates, roses, and gift bags." Chatham Record, 9 Oct 2014.*

Features incorporated in the Fair program over the years have included such activities as a school-day parade, band concerts, doll and fashion shows, and a dairy cattle show. In 1954, the Miss Piedmont Beauty Pageant was initiated. Contests have included 4-H exhibits and clothing contests, canning and cooking contests, largest pumpkin contest, talent contests, and a county-wide garden contest.

In 1977, a log cabin built by former enslaved man, Bob Milliken, was donated and installed on the fairgrounds to serve as a Black History Museum. [More about the history of the cabin.](#)

Over the years, as Chatham County became less segregated, the Fair increasingly became a more inclusive community event. In 1981, the name of the association was changed from the "Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair" to the "Chatham County Agricultural and Industrial Fair, Inc." Still run by a largely African-American board, the Fair today draws contributors and attendees from the wider community. The Chatham County Fair is the oldest (and probably only) active African-American-owned fair in North Carolina.

The land bought in 1952 is still owned and run by the Fair Association; the property covers 12 acres within the city limits of Pittsboro. The Chatham County Fair has been held every year since 1950, except for a scaled-back version held in 2012 and a cancelation in 2020 during the Covid pandemic. The 2021 Fair is tentatively scheduled for September 23<sup>rd</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup>.

Many good things have come from the Chatham County Fair. The first Black law enforcement officers in the county were men deputized to police the event. Many Black farmers gained statewide attention when their Chatham County Fair exhibits went on to win prizes in the North Carolina State Fair.

The Fair also provided a way for Black people in the county to meet, socialize and organize to meet goals. Out of the organization, a strong Black leadership community evolved and economic progress was made.

## **Additional Resources**

A [more detailed history of the Fair](#) can be found on the website of the Chatham County Agricultural and Industrial Fair Association. That history acknowledges the contributions of many in Chatham County's Black community.

[Timeline of major fair events.](#)

In January and February of 1977, *The Pittsboro Herald* ran a series of articles outlining the establishment of the Farm and Home Organization and the County Fair:

[Part 1: The Struggle for Black Economic Independence Begins](#)

[Part 2: A Black Agent Comes to Chatham](#)

[Part 3: Leaders, Progress Grow Out of Black Fair](#)

[Negro Agricultural Building Dedicated](#)

[Bryant Retires as Fair Head \*The Pittsboro Herald\*, 9 Feb 1977](#)

[Slave Cabin Dedicated in Baldwin's Memory \*The Pittsboro Herald\*, 7 Sep 1977](#)

*\*Special thanks to CCFA President Larry Brooks, Vice Presidents Elizabeth Alston and Glenn Foxx, former treasurer Annie McCrimmon, current fair manager Carl Bryant, and to Tiffany Hancock of the Chatham County office of the NC State Cooperative Extension for their assistance with gathering information and photographs for this article. This article was compiled by Beverly B. Wiggins.*

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