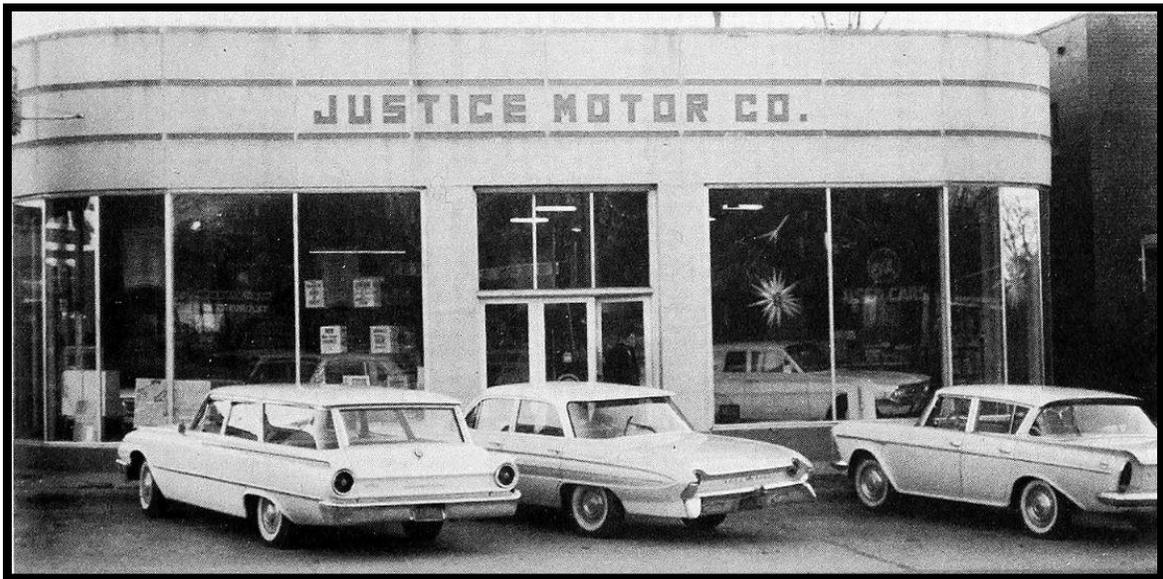


# The Justice Brothers and Justice Motor Company

by Margaret Hamlet Bingham July 2020

In Chatham County for the majority of the twentieth century, the name “Justice” was associated with automobile sales—specifically Justice Motor Company in Pittsboro and The Justice Motor Company and then Chatham Motors in Siler City—and with two Hickory Mountain born brothers— Frank N. Justice and Fred C. Justice. Their start in the automobile business, however, began in Washington, DC, far beyond the bounds of Chatham County and North Carolina.



## Frank N. Justice

On May 1, 1910, Frank boarded the train in Siler City bound for Washington, DC. He was there for over 25 years where he was involved in a variety of automobile associated roles. Records indicate he was one of the incorporators of the Automobile Engineering College (1912), a garage owner (1914), an automobile salesman for Marion-Hanley Motors (1917), a Willys-Overland auto manager (1920s), and with the Auto Sales Company in DC (1921 and 1930). Family lore exists that “Mr. Frank” said that, while in DC, he had the largest Willys dealership in the country.



Frank Justice at his desk, 1959



Siler City Chevrolet Dealership, 1955  
Duane Hall collection.

In 1937, Frank returned to Siler City to help his brother Fred run the Siler City Chevrolet dealership Chatham Motors. In the following years, he became the owner of the dealership and expanded the dealership footprint by adding a new building next door to the 1926 Quality Motors building originally built by John W. Emerson. A newspaper story stated that the new addition contained 22,000 square feet of floor space. This building is now one of the Siler City buildings owned by the NC Arts Incubator. Family members remember a break-in at the Chatham Motors building when robbers entered by climbing onto the roof and removing a skylight to gain entry.

The robbers drilled holes in the safe to steal \$8,500 in cash and checks and took the firm's cash register.

Frank incorporated the business in 1948 (June 21), added Lloyd Griffith (formerly with General Motors) as an associate in the early 1950s, and subsequently sold the dealership to focus on real estate and expanding his role in supporting the Siler City community. He and his wife Anna lived at 416 S. Dogwood Avenue in Siler City at the time of his death on November 21, 1965.

### **Fred C. Justice**

On November 5, 1913, Fred left Spencer, NC, where he had been living with his oldest sister Rena Dorsett and her family, to work with Frank in the automobile business in Washington, DC. In 1915 he left DC for Detroit to work in the Maxwell and Hudson plants as a mechanic. He returned in 1916 to Hickory Mountain to help his parents, Nathan B. Justice and Margaret Richardson Justice, on the family farm as his father was in poor health. In 1923, Fred left the farm and began selling cars in Siler City. On April 17, 1923, Fred bought the Siler City Machine Company from Jack and Sam Clapp (Clapp Equipment Building, N. Chatham Avenue). There he began the Willys-Overland agency where, from the back of the Clapp Building, he sold the first Willys-Overland ever sold in Siler City. In 1927, he had the Chrysler-Plymouth agency and in 1928 and 1929, the Hudson and Essex agencies. These businesses all operated under the name "The Justice Motor Company."



Fred Justice at his desk



Fred Justice staff. Pittsboro.

One of the stories from these early days that Fred told concerned the shortage of red cars. A customer from Liberty, NC, wanted a red roadster to drive in the Siler City Fourth of July parade. Fred called the plant and then called brother Frank in DC. The two of them drove to Detroit and returned to Siler City with the red roadster in time for the parade. Another family story of Fred during this time was of his once getting his roadster stuck in the mud on his way home to Hickory Mountain from Siler City. Unable to get his roadster out, Fred walked to Newbie Dark's place to get Newbie's two large stallions to pull the roadster out of the mud. The stallions could not budge the car. So, Fred walked

four miles to his own house on Hickory Mountain and got his two mules and wagon. The mules pulled the roadster out of the mud and Fred drove home sitting behind the steering wheel and holding the reins to the mules and wagon through the car windows.

In 1930, he expanded his dealerships to Pittsboro with first a Ford dealership and then changed in 1933 to Chevrolet. In 1937, brother Frank came back to NC to help Fred with the Siler City Chevrolet dealership (Chatham Motors). Fred later added dealerships in Fuquay Varina and Apex (Pike Chevrolet) and expanded the Pittsboro dealership to include Oldsmobile and Cadillac.



New Car Event at Chatham Motors, Siler City Goldston Studio Collection Courtesy of Larry Pickard

After a heart attack in 1963, he retired from Justice Motor Company and turned his interest to real estate. In the 1950s he had joined brother Frank in several real estate ventures in Chatham and Wake counties. By the 1960s and 1970s, Fred was involved in real estate dealings throughout Chatham County where he was a familiar figure walking the Pittsboro sidewalks, doffing his wide-brimmed fedora to all the ladies. He died from a stroke on December 21, 1976.

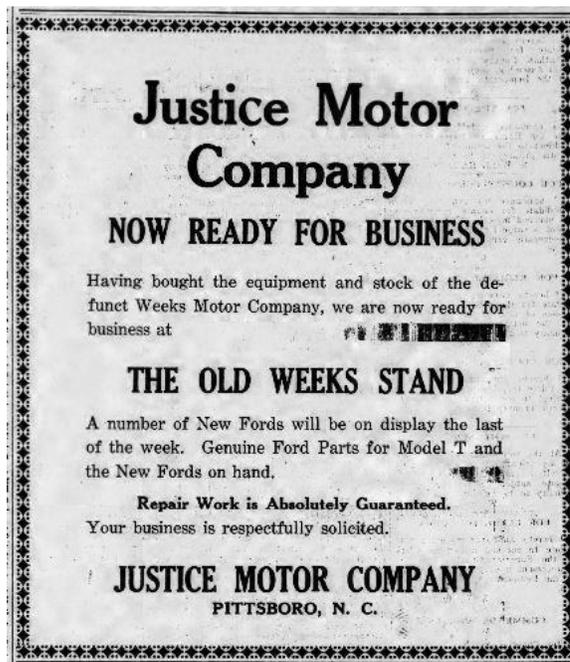
## The Justice Dealerships in Pittsboro

Even though in the 1930 census Fred C. Justice was listed as the proprietor of a garage in Siler City, he would soon be opening a shop in Pittsboro. Per articles in The Chatham Record on January 30, 1930, and February 27, 1930, he was in the process of securing the Ford agency for Pittsboro. The dealership at that time, held by J. C. Weeks, Jr., doing business as Weeks Motor Company, was in bankruptcy. Mr. Weeks had bought the Ford equipment and inventory in September 1927 and leased the building at 44 Hillsboro Street from Bruce Stroud who had been operating as Chatham Motor Company. In the Pittsboro application for the National Register of Historic Places, this building is referred to as the Stroud Building. It was built in 1924 by B. M. Poe for Bruce Stroud's Ford agency.

On March 8, 1930, Fred purchased 40 or more used automobiles and trucks from the Weeks Motor Company inventory and announced in a March 20<sup>th</sup> article in The Chatham Record that "Justice Motor Company (is) now ready for business having bought the equipment and stock of the defunct Weeks Motor Company...." This was the beginning of the Justice automobile business in Pittsboro and the continuation of a Ford dealership occupying the 44 Hillsboro Street building.

Another article in The Chatham Record reported that Fred would be moving to Pittsboro once the school year ended (his family consisted of wife Hazel and children Blanche and Jack). The same article announced that Mr. Bob Goodwin, a former salesman for Weeks Motor Company, would remain to assist customers and that two mechanics—R. K. Dixon and W. G. Smith—from The Justice Motor Company garage in Siler City would be joining the Pittsboro dealership.

Three years later, on April 1, 1933, Fred received the Chevrolet franchise, switching from Ford to Chevrolet. He was quoted in the March 30, 1933, issue of The Chatham Record as saying "he now had what he believed to be the best car that he has ever handled." The dealership remained on Hillsboro Street where Fred had been selling Fords.



**Justice Motor  
Company**  
**NOW READY FOR BUSINESS**

Having bought the equipment and stock of the defunct Weeks Motor Company, we are now ready for business at

**THE OLD WEEKS STAND**

A number of New Fords will be on display the last of the week. Genuine Ford Parts for Model T and the New Fords on hand.

**Repair Work is Absolutely Guaranteed.**  
Your business is respectfully solicited.

**JUSTICE MOTOR COMPANY**  
PITTSBORO, N. C.

Ad from the 20 March 1930 Chatham Record

In October and November of 1939 Fred purchased several lots on the south side of West Street (Highway 64W) as well as connecting lots facing South Main Street (Highway 15-501). The property along Highway 64W was the site of the former home of Dr. H. T. Chapin and stretched from the west side of A. B. Roberson's filling station (on the Courthouse circle) to the Methodist Church graveyard line. The property facing Highway 15-501 consisted of several lots across from the Chatham Theatre. According to articles in The Chatham Record soon after the purchase, one of the Highway 15-501 lots was to be used as a car lot. A March 6, 1941, article in The Chatham Record announced that "work has begun on a brick structure across the street from the theater, which will house a repair shop to be used in connection with a used car lot of Justice Motor Company." In May 1942, an announcement in the paper stated that "Justice Motor Company has moved from its old

location on Hillsboro Street to the new building which was recently completed across the street from the Chatham Theatre.” Now, the entire dealership was in this building and adjoining car lot. At the time, the U. S. was in the throes of World War II. Family members recall Fred saying that during the war the car lot was so full of unsold cars that he started selling parts to generate income. After WWII, the demand for cars was so great that Fred was selling them faster than he could get them from the Charlotte distribution center.

On June 13, 1947, Fred organized Justice Motor Company with the NC Secretary of State. In 1949, he expanded the Pittsboro dealership building by adding an Art Deco/Art Moderne style showroom to the current building. This showroom fronted onto West Street (Highway 64W) with a parts department and service bay area behind that attached to the original building. This Art Deco/Art Moderne building designed by Fred’s nephew George F. Hackney, a Durham architect, was a unique style of architecture in Pittsboro at the time and remains so to the present.

Sales were so good prior to the grand opening of the new building that Fred sold all the cars sent for the opening of the new Pittsboro showroom before the opening. Fred had to promise General Motors that he would not sell any more cars before the company representatives arrived for the September 3, 1949, celebration. Crowds—reported to be over 3,500 people—packed the “huge shop at the rear which was decorated by streamers” according to the September 9<sup>th</sup> issue of The Chatham Record. They came to see the new building and the new cars and to be entertained by Arthur Smith, radio personality of the time, and the Briar Hoppers of WBT Charlotte radio. Guests received souvenir pencils and balloons and participated in drawings for a \$300 down payment on a Chevrolet sedan, a Philco refrigerator, and a Philco combination radio and phonograph.



Opening celebration, Justice Motor Company, 3 Sep 1949

In the early 1950's Fred added Oldsmobile and then Cadillac which became his car of choice that he would drive anywhere—in pastures, across creeks, even into the woods to check on his cows or to explore a piece of property! Ads in 1952 issues of *The Chatham Record* indicated that all three brands were available at Justice Motor Company in Pittsboro.

Over the years, the dealership footprint was expanded with the purchase of several lots for displaying and storing cars, new and used. The first of these properties that Fred purchased was the “Smith” home at the corner of West Street (Highway 64W) and Fayetteville Street. This purchase in December 1946 was formerly the residence built for Attorney Joseph John Jackson who had his law office on the corner of the property.

In September 1950, Fred purchased another “car lot” little known to the public. It was a half-acre lot behind the Pittsboro Methodist Church (now part of their parking lot). On this land he built a metal building used for securing new automobiles. It was here that the cars to be unveiled at “show day” each Fall were hidden until it was time the night before to sneak them into the showroom. These Fall show days when the new models for the coming year were unveiled were major celebrations for the community. The front doors would be opened wide and the interior would be decorated with balloons and piles of giveaways. Even today, somewhere in a Chatham County home, there remains a wooden yardstick, a pencil, a potholder, or even a calendar emblazoned with “Justice Motor Company” from those celebrations. Three cars typically graced the showroom, two to the left of the front door and one to the right. Often an additional car was squeezed into the showroom and cars were also placed on West Street in front of the dealership.

In May 1972, the dealership footprint was expanded a third and final time with another car lot. This property was directly across West Street from the dealership. The Stedman house, built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, occupied this lot. It was bordered on the west side by the former home of Harvey Gunter and on the east side by the small alley behind the Blair Hotel building. In later years, the lot was known more for the gigantic holly tree anchoring the West Street frontage than for being a car lot.

After Fred's retirement in 1963, his son Jack P. Justice took over the dealership. Jack ran the dealership until it (but not the Art Deco building) was sold in 1981 to John A. Wieland, who opened the dealership as Wieland Chevrolet-Oldsmobile. As to the buildings today in 2020, both the Art Deco building on West Street and the building on the Sanford Road still stand but are no longer associated with a car dealership. Currently the 1949 addition is occupied by the Pittsboro Roadhouse restaurant while the 1942 building facing the Sanford Road now houses Chatham Business (20 Sanford Rd.) and The Mod (22 and 46 Sanford Rd.)

During the over forty years that Fred C. Justice had a car dealership in Pittsboro, he established a business that gave many Chatham County workers employment, that offered a good “deal” and trusted repair work to customers from all over the county and beyond, and that supported the town economy. Personally, he became a mainstay in the community serving as Town Commissioner, Mayor, and board member of various entities and, professionally, he led Justice Motor Company in becoming one of the cornerstones of the growth of Pittsboro in the mid-1900s.



Justice Motor Company staff. Pittsboro, 1952.

Justice family members: Fred Justice far right, Curtis Hamlet third from right, and Jack Justice behind the cash register.  
Goldston Studio Collection Courtesy of Larry Pickard

### **Walking Through the Justice Motor Company Building in the 1950s**

If you were visiting Justice Motor Company in the 1950s, you would probably locate the dealership in downtown Pittsboro by sighting the engraved "Justice Motor Co." across the front of the building and just under the roof line. After parking nearby along West Street (Highway 64W) and heading toward the double front glass doors opening onto West Street, you might note that the street curbing in front of these doors was cut on a slant to allow easy passage of cars across the sidewalk into the building. Passing through the glass



Justice Motor Company, Pittsboro, late 1940s.

doors, it would be evident that they had been sized to allow cars to be brought into the showroom from the street.

Once inside the showroom, you would have walls of curved glass stretching on either side of you. These curved glass windows (an expensive novelty of the time) instead of solid walls allowed more cars to be on display in the showroom and viewed by passersby. Beneath these windows would be a window ledge for display racks and for posters to be viewed from both inside and outside...as well as a place for small children to sit and play. Beneath your feet would be a checkerboard green and tan tile floor and above your head would be slowly turning fans stirring the air. There was no air conditioning, only these fans and the doors thrown wide open.

Step a bit farther inside and you would pass the cars on display on each side of the entrance. Three cars typically graced the showroom, two to the left of the front door and one to the right. Under the tires of these cars, customers would more than likely see squares of cardboard as "Mr. Fred" did not like his showroom floor marked with black tire prints.

If you were looking for auto parts, you would look to your right to see the parts department with its rows of metal shelving visible behind a curved counter. The counter stretched from the far glass window to the entrance to the service bays beyond, with a swinging gate door in the middle of the span and a cash register perched on the counter nearer the service bay end. To a child of the time, the parts department held a special draw as this was where glass blocks built into the lower counter area held model cars.



Jack Justice in the Parts Department Justice Motor Company 1952  
Goldston Studio Collection Courtesy of Larry Pickard

If you were shopping for a new car, you would look to your left to the two wood-paneled offices with a grouping of two arm chairs and a sofa in front of the larger office. This furniture area was where the car salesmen passed their time waiting for potential buyers. Next to this grouping of furniture you might note a single glass door leading to the service

bay driveway on the east side of the building. Opening that door and looking down at the threshold, you would see perhaps the most unique feature of the building: a buffalo head nickel placed in the cement. Fred's nephew Everett Justice was involved in pouring the cement for the building, including this threshold. Family lore holds that Everett always placed a nickel in the building cement as he completed a job. This practice led to Fred saying that the construction of the building took his last nickel.

On the wall directly behind the furniture was a glass window opening into the larger of the two wood-paneled offices—Mr. Fred's personal office—and the location where many a car deal were finalized. The office was complete with a large desk with a glass top trapping numerous business cards underneath, two client chairs under the glass window at the front, and an executive chair to the backside of the desk. On the back wall of the office was a door leading to a small bathroom and above the door to the bathroom was mounted a deer head complete with a respectable-sized rack.

If you were there to pay a bill, you would head to the other office which was the business office. It was a narrow office with a metal desk on one side and a counter underneath a sliding glass window on the other side. It was at this counter that you would pay your bill. The main feature in this office that would catch your eye would be the large (over head-high) black safe just beyond the desk, complete with gold lettering, a round wheel to spin and a metal handle to engage for opening.

Leaving the showroom through the doors between the business office and the parts department, you would be walking into the service bay area. The doors were designed to allow cars to be moved into the showroom from the service bay. Few customers ever ventured into "the back," but, if you had, you would see the service lifts along the right wall and at the far end along that right wall a garage door leading out to the back parking area. It was here that the red and white Chevy wrecker with a split-boom winch was often parked. It was used to bring in cars from wrecks and non-running vehicles needing service.



Service Bay Area Justice Motor Company 1952 Goldston Studio Collection Courtesy of Larry Pickard

If you looked to the left of the doors leading into the service bay area from the showroom, you would see the service manager's desk, a water fountain, and then the bathrooms. Next, passing the service bay door from the West Street driveway you would find on the far-left wall the Coke machine and beyond that the wash bay. (Many a child had to go looking for that extra penny when the cost of a small glass bottle of Coke from the short red machine increased from 5 cents to 6 cents!)

If you stepped farther into the service bay area, you would see a car ramp in the middle of the far back wall. This car ramp led downward into the initial building, the 1942 Chevrolet dealership/repair building. Venturing down the ramp into this dimly-lit space, you would see in front of you closed rooms filled with automobile parts and to the left a room for the paint shop. The storage rooms and the paint shop were separated by a wide section of flooring, with garage doors at each end—one to the Sanford Road (Highway 15-501) and one to the back parking lot. When new cars were delivered in the 1950s, the car carrier sometimes unloaded the cars at this Sanford Road door for the cars to initially be stored in this area until ready for display.



Service Bay and Car Ramp Justice Motor Company 1952 Goldston Studio Collection Courtesy of Larry Pickard

Having walked from the West Street 1949 entrance back to this Sanford Road 1942 garage/repair shop, you would have had a glimpse of what a Chatham County car dealership in the mid-1900s was like. In fact, visiting Justice Motor Company any time between 1949 and the early 1980s, you would see little change from this description of the 1950s dealership. Yet, the dealership was more than the physical building. It was also an experience, one created by the knowledge that you would get a good buy and guaranteed repairs, that there would be congenial interactions with the staff, and that you knew the dealership was a trusted member of the business community. All total, during the mid-1900s, Justice Motor Company played a big role in meeting the transportation needs of the area, in supporting the town and county in economic growth, and in bettering the lives of many residents.



Justice Motor Company, Pittsboro 1981

*\*Margaret Hamlet Bingham is the granddaughter of Fred C. Justice and the daughter of Blanche Justice and Curtis T. Hamlet. She grew up in Pittsboro and now resides with her husband Bill Bingham in Garner, NC. Contributing to the article were Fred Hamlet, her twin brother, and John Justice, her first cousin, son of Jack Justice and Mary Garrett Justice, and grandson of Fred C. Justice. Both Curtis Hamlet and Jack Justice were Justice Motor Company employees in the 1950s.*

6Aug2020