

The Oval Oak Washboard

*Note: Following is an excerpt from the book **Beyond Fried Rabbit, Chatham's Historical Heritage**. The book is a collection of articles about places and events in Chatham County written by Fred J. Vatter.*

While hosting a group of school children on a visit to the Chatham County Historical Association's museum in Pittsboro's Courthouse, I noticed several of them staring at an object on display. It was an Oval Oak Washboard, which was manufactured in Siler City and sold nationally for many years.

I asked if they knew what it was, and after some contemplation one lad suggested that it might be some sort of musical instrument. They were amazed upon learning what it was and how hard women labored to do the family laundry before the days of automatic washers, dryers and detergents. Most important, I explained, was the washboard's one-piece bentwood oval oak frame which required no nails and made it very strong.



The manufacture of bentwood equipment and furniture was an important business in Siler City during the early to mid-twentieth century.

In 1909 Milton Smith and Fred Hadley were operating a machine shop in Siler City. Perhaps inspired by a few wood-bending shops in the area, they designed machinery to make bentwood frames and attach them to corrugated galvanized metal. The one piece oval frame wrapped around the metal, requiring no nails, but used bolts at the bottom to hold it to a crosspiece.

Messrs. Smith and Hadley patented this design and commenced operations under the name of Chatham Manufacturing Company. Initially they produced ten dozen washboards daily, but the design was a success and within a year the business had to move to a larger building on West Raleigh Street. By 1911 the output was one hundred dozen boards, produced by 25 employees. In January 1913 the business was incorporated as the Oval Oak Manufacturing Company. In 1917 the controlling interest was acquired by the John C. Lane family. Its business continued to prosper and in 1944 Oval Oak Washboard was bought by the National Washboard Company of Chicago, which closed the Siler City plant.

It is significant that the Oval Oak Washboard was conceived and developed in a small machine shop in Siler City and went on to become well-known nationally.

See the Oval Oak Washboard and the plates used to print the name and design on the washboard at the Chatham Historical Museum in the historic courthouse.