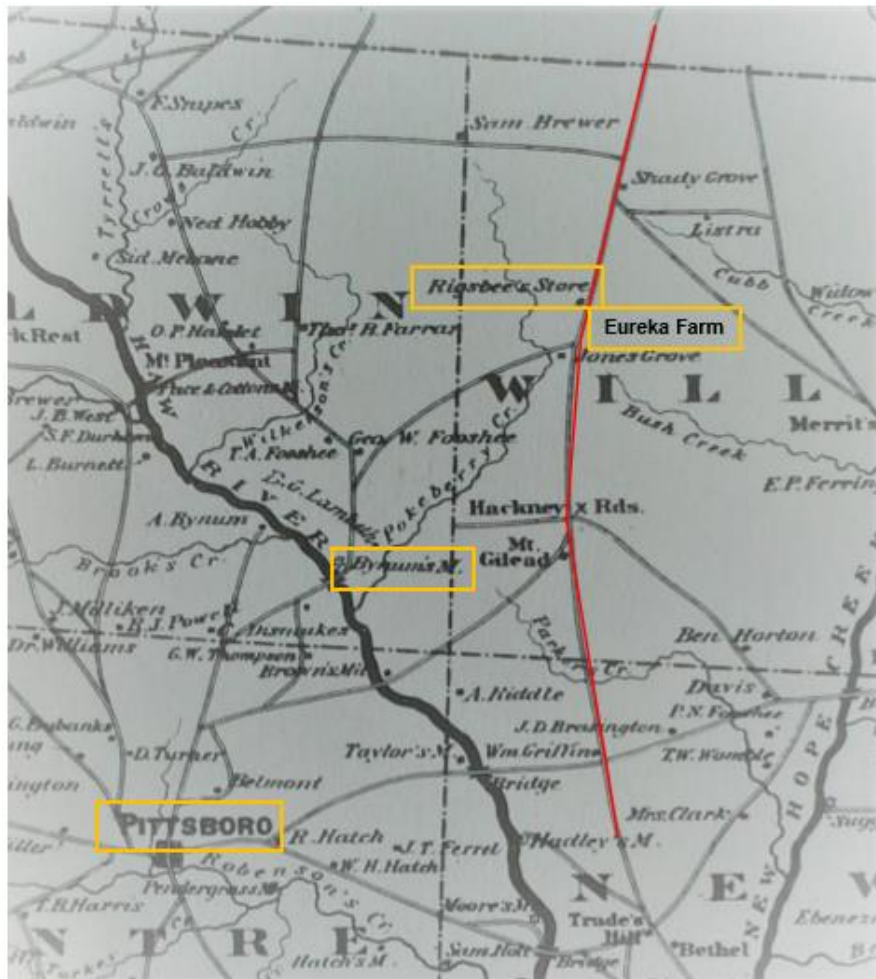


The Riggsbee Community in Chatham County, NC

by Bill Sharpe
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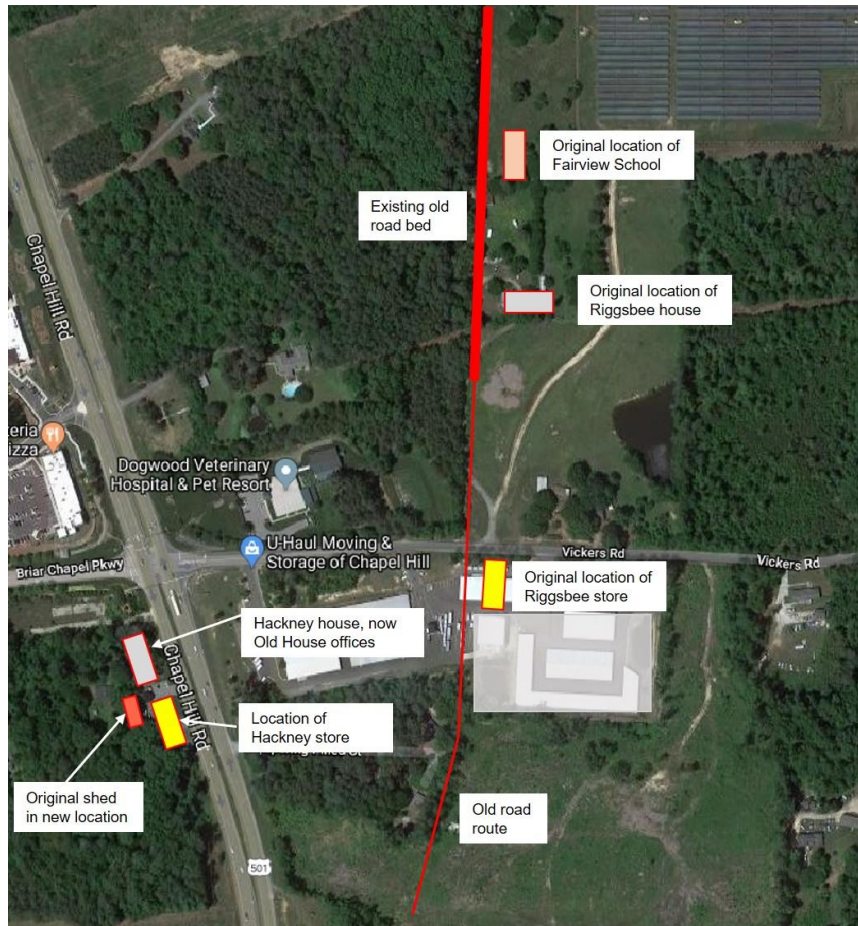
The Chatham County community of Riggsbee was located at what is now the intersection of Briar Chapel Parkway with US 15-501. In the latter half of the 19th century, it had a store with a post office, a one-room school and two churches. It was, indeed, a community. By the 1920s, the school and post office were gone; the store closed in the 1950s and only the churches remain.



Captain Ramsey's 1870 Map

The earliest detailed map of Chatham County is by Captain N.A. Ramsey in 1870.¹ Yellow boxes have been added to highlight places of interest – Riggsbee's Store (changed to Riggsbee in 1894), Bynum's Mill, and Pittsboro. The Fearington's Eureka Farm existed at that time and has been added. A later AAA map in 1910 shows Riggsbee as a community between Bynum and Carrboro.² The 1870 road between Hillsborough and Fayetteville is shown as a red line. Roads between communities in the 19th century followed the easiest terrain, often over Indian trails. Those old roads cut through the woods and were simply wide dirt paths. Over the decades the soil in the roadbed was compacted as well as washed away during rains. The result could be a roadbed in a trench several feet lower than the surrounding land.

The Riggsbee Area



Map Showing 15-501 and 1800s Road

On the Google map above, the Riggsbee store and school are east of the 1870 road. The new road, now highway 15-501, was constructed in the late 1800s or early 1900s and paved between 1920 and 1930. It lies to the west of Riggsbee and removed a sharp curve in the old road. The old road bed is indicated on the map by a thick red line. It can still be seen as a shallow trench interspersed with smaller trash trees through the larger pines. The thin red line traces the old road south based on both Clarence Durham's recollections as well as tree lines and current property lines.³ Farther south, the old road runs along the tree line between Galloway Ridge and an open field next to 15-501. It is mostly washed away now and filled with some larger trees, but a few segments are still visible there.

When the road was moved, the Riggsbee's store was no longer beside the highway. To solve this problem, the Riggsbee's store, house, and some outbuildings were moved to the west side of 15-501 in the early 1900s. My cousin Jesse Fearington told me that this was done by oxen pulling the buildings over logs to the new location. Later, these structures were owned by James H. Hackney, the last Riggsbee Postmaster, who ran the small store that is now gone. The nice white house, formerly Countryside Antiques but now The Old House containing offices, still stands. The addition on the left was added much later.



The Riggsbee-Hackney

The store was located 20 yards south where a small yellow building is now. In between was an original red shed for buggies. It has been recently demolished with the wood used by Peacock Woodworkers to make a conference table for use in an office in the house.

The Post Office

Records in the National Postal Museum of the Smithsonian Libraries provide a history of the Riggsbee community. The post office was established at Riggsbee's Store in 1858 with Asa Riggsbee as Postmaster. It was administered by the Confederate States of America from 1861 to 1865 and reopened in 1870. The name changed to simply Riggsbee in 1894 as the postmark shows. It was discontinued in 1915 with James H. Hackney (1881-1990) as the Postmaster.⁴ I remember him and his store; we would take eggs for him to sell or trade. Gas was bought farther down the road at Andrews Store.



The School

Clarence Durham's father, Edward Watson Durham (1889-1955), attended the one-room Fairview School located near Riggsbee's store on the east side of the old road. After it closed, probably in the 1920s, a local carpenter, Foy Kirby, dismantled it and built a small house still standing on the west side of 15-501 across from Lystra Road.



The Kirby House

The minutes of the Chatham County Board of Education⁵ show that as late as 1895, there were 92 one-room white schools and 46 one-room colored schools in Chatham County. Those seem like enormous numbers, but Chatham is a large county that was sparsely populated at the time. Schools needed to be within walking or horseback distance from the residents. The teachers, almost all women, had little formal education themselves and dealt with as many as 40 students of all ages and grades.

This photograph was shared by Glenn Lazarus, a genealogist and Chatham County Historical Association volunteer, and labeled "Agnes Jane Tillman" (1865-1909). She was a long-time resident of the Riggsbee community, and this picture was almost certainly taken at Fairview school. She is in the back row wearing a striped collar. If she was 15 at the time, this would have been taken around 1880. There are 15 students of widely varying ages and one teacher, the older woman on the left.



Fairview School ~ 1880

The Churches

Lystra Baptist Church was founded in 1852 and was the white church of the Riggsbee community. Most of the Riggsbee Community attended it and are buried there. Mount Zion Baptist Church is adjacent to Lystra Baptist on Lystra Road and is one of the leading African-American churches in Chatham County. The founders began worship in the kitchen of a white host in 1860, and then used the Lystra church. The initial portion of the present church was built in the early 20th century.



Lystra Baptist Church



Mount Zion Baptist Church

References

¹ http://www.ncgenweb.us/chatham/chtmap70_3.jpg

² <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/ncmaps/id/950/rec/1>

³ Clarence Durham (b.1936) is a high school classmate who grew up on a farm on Andrews Store Road that was part of the Riggsbee community. He explored the area around Riggsbee as a boy and knew more its history from his parents.

⁴ POST OFFICES AND POSTMASTERS OF NORTH CAROLINA – COLONIAL TO USPS, North Carolina Postal History Society, Charlotte, NC, 1996.

⁵ <http://www.usgwarchives.net/nc/statewide/records/chatham.html>