

# *Weekend Historical Tour Offers View of One Dozen Siler City Locations*

*This article appeared in the Thursday, September 23, 2004,  
Chatham New/Record, 13-A and is reprinted by permission.*

by Milburn Gibbs

A dozen historical homes and businesses were included on the Historical Tour of Siler City, sponsored by the Town of Siler City and the Chatham County Historical Association.

In addition, the Braxton School Gymnasium was filled with other important historical data, photographs, and documents about the town, beginning in its formative days of the late 1880's.

Siler City- boasted 254 citizens in 1890, three years after its incorporation as a town. The prestigious privately owned Thompson Boarding School operated from 1887-1897, located where the town hall now sits. Students were largely from out of town, which paid \$7.50 - \$8.00 a month to board.

Judge Walter Davis Siler (1878-1951) graduated from UNC Law School and entered private practice in Siler City in 1900. He was mayor of the town, served ten years in the N.C. Legislature and was one of the leading early pioneers of the town.

"My father (Siler City Police Chief June Moody) told me a story about Judge Siler when he was a practicing lawyer," Siler City Commissioner Helen Buckner said. "Siler was a short man. An opposing lawyer said to him once that, 'I could swallow you whole.' The attorney referred both to Siler's size and his legal expertise.

"Siler retorted: 'If you did, then you would have more brains in your stomach than in your head.'"

Michael Rogers' DECA students from Jordan-Matthews High School were performing quite professionally as greeters at each location on the tour. Caroline Butts, Curtis McBee and Andrew VanSchooten were three who were stationed outside Chatham Avenue buildings at Farmer's Alliance Store (1909), Chatham Bank (1913) and the Old Hardware Store (1906) respectively.

Joe Cole and Richard Danek were demonstrating their potting skills. Both are Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) instructors in addition, as so many artists are at the Arts Incubator.

Chatham Bank occupied the building on the southwest corner of Chatham Avenue and Raleigh Street until 1935. The original permanent vault is still operational, building owners Tam and Dennis de St. Aubin said.

The property was later both the Jewel Box and Buckner's Jewelers, a barber shop, post office, Dr. Frank Swain's office, the law offices of Moody and Moody, an insurance office, surveyor's office, a cafe and the home of Beane's Grocery.

Mrs. Beane, a local character who operated the grocery, reportedly refused to take a local businessman's money once, stating she did not accept "Yankee" money. She also was said to have called the police when (in her opinion) too many non-residents of Siler City were crowding the streets of downtown. She wanted them dispatched back from whence they had come.

"This building has worn lots of hats," Dennis de St. Aubin said during the former bank's tour.

Chatham County Board of Commissioners' Chair Tommv Emerson was on hand at the old Quality Motors building built around 1926. It is now one of the eight buildings purchased by the NC Arts Incubator, Siler City's innovative economic development project.

"My father, John W. Emerson, founded this dealership when he was 21, and ran it until he sold it to a Mr. Fisher, a salesman from Ramseur It was again sold in the late 1930's to Frank Justice, who expanded the business and built a building where the car lot had been next door," Emerson said.

"My father opened the business as Economy Motor Company and went into business with his brother-in-law, Raymond Upchurch."

Justice was a former Indy 500 driver and a Chatham County native, Emerson said.

Emerson's father, John later owned the Pure Oil distributorship and the Pure Oil station where Jack Brewer's office is today. Emerson was later county Recorder of Deeds and was the longest serving sheriff in Chatham County history (18 years).

Several stately homes were on the tour, including the Gregson-Hadley House on E. Raleigh Street, now owned by Julie Bourque. The home has recently had some brilliant remodeling.

Cindy Edwards was on hand at her former residence, the Snipes-Fox House (built 1897-1902).

"The house (now vacant) boasts six fireplaces and the original mantles, floors and some beaded pine ceilings," Edwards said. "It is on the National Historic Register.

"Once restoration is in your blood, you forget how much work it is."

The Edwards' moved to another renovation project in Pittsboro last year, verifying her words.

Siler City Commissioner Larry Cheek explained the history of the Corinth A.M.E. Zion Church on Martin Luther King Blvd. It was the earliest organized church in Siler City, founded in 1884. The present brick edifice was built in 1952.

"The Alston family (contractors and masons) and men of the church donated their labor after work and on Saturdays and did most of the work themselves," Cheek remembered.

It was an effort by the entire congregation, with a little outside help.

"We walked into the church in 1952 with no mortgage," member Elizabeth Edwards said "Thomas Brooks said he would match whatever we raised to build the church, and he did."

Cheek said the first church had been a brush arbor before 1900, which meant the faithful gathered under a grove of trees in lieu of a worship house,

The Walter Siler House was not open as the docent had a death in the family.

Other historical homes and buildings were the Matthews-Wren House, the First Baptist Church and the City Hall (both on the National Historic Register) and Siler City High School (now Braxton Manor) were also open to the public.

Weather was cool and perfect for a tour of Siler City's diverse history. What was once a bustling downtown and later fell into disrepair today is being revived mainly by efforts of the Arts Incubator. NC Incubator CEO Leon Tongret said the Justice Building would soon be fully occupied, as Terry C. McInturff Guitars will be moving in as soon as inspections are completed.

The burned-out Methodist Church on S. Chatham Avenue will be the next restoration project, and the jewel of the incubator.

The Chatham Historical Association and the town put in a great deal of work to organize and facilitate the Sunday afternoon tour. With weather cooperating beautifully, the tour came together as an informative and educational success.

Well done, Siler City.

---

## The Historical Tour of Siler City was an unqualified success on Sunday, September 19 ...

*Photos are identified from top left clockwise. Gregson-Hadley House owner Julie Bourque has recently been remodeling the 1903 home. The outside of the home is shown below At the Farmer's Alliance Store, President Edwin Clapp, J-M DECA greeter Caroline Butts, and Secretary/ store manager Nancy Tysor are shown. It is Siler City's oldest business. Tam and Dennis de St. Aubin are shown at the former Chatham Bank Building. The permanent vault is shown behind them. Siler City Town Commissioner Larry Cheek is shown in the sanctuary of the Corinth A. M. E. Zion Church. Potter and CC instructor Joe Cole is shown crafting a pot during the tour.*

