

Chatham County's unsung resource

CHATHAM'S Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



If asked what resources contributed to the growth and development of Chatham County over the years one might be inclined to think of physical things such as timber, agricultural products, the power of its waterways, or perhaps the coming of the railroads.

Based on my contacts and observations over the past fifteen years I am firmly convinced that Chatham's greatest asset has been its independent,

dedicated, and hard-working people.

The earliest arrivals in the area now comprising Chatham were mainly from five groups: those of English descent who moved from the coastal areas; the Scots-Highlanders; the Scots-Irish; the Germans; and enslaved African-Americans.

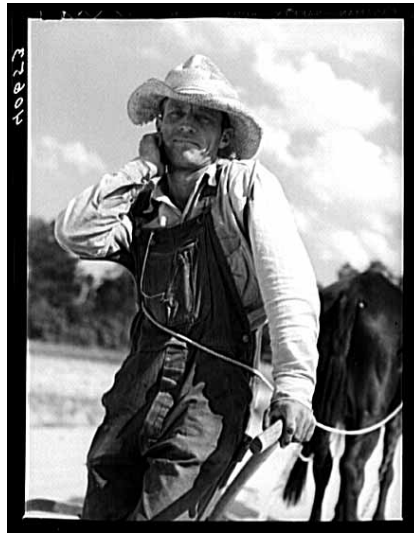
Those in the first four groups migrated here to escape economic, political and climate related hardships and abusive domination by others. The African-Americans did not come by choice but sometimes used their talents to become skilled craftsmen, mechanics and builders in spite of a lack of freedom. Some through persistence even taught themselves to read

when it was illegal.

All five groups brought a desire for independence, self-determination, and improvement, along with varying talents, which helped to shape the economic and social climate of our county.

In 1984, Mr. Bud Griffen of the Siler City Chamber of Commerce described Chathamites as "fair, industrious and religious, and they believe in giving a good day's work for a good day's pay." They were also committed over the long term. Back in 1978 the Hadley-Peoples Manufacturing Company retired Mr. Henry Light who had worked in that textile mill's card room for 70 years.

A couple of years ago I was privileged to attend the 90th birthday party of J. Edward Booth, a Chatham native. In addition to his Olde Mill Farm, he owns a good deal of land and houses in the county, even after having some taken for Jordan Lake. Mr. Booth



The county has a proud history of hard working citizenry, despite tough economic barriers.
PHOTO BY JACK DELANO, MAY 1940

graciously agreed to set up a date for an oral history interview, but asked me to call before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m. when he wouldn't be out working in his sawmill.

As a boy, Mr. Booth was obliged to drop out of high school for several years to work for his father, but returned to school because he wanted his diploma.

It was a positive experience because being older he got to drive the school bus and

also met his wife. Over the years Mr. Booth worked hard to acquire equipment and property with his earnings. He only borrowed funds once and felt so uneasy that he could not wait to pay the loan back.

A vivid description of Chatham life in the early and mid-twentieth century was given to me by Wilson Poe, who died several years ago at the age of 93. I first met him while sitting on the front porch of Reno Sharp's store on the Pittsboro-Goldston Road, and was later

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