

Gift of a cap prompted historical review

CHATHAM'S Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



On a cool, rainy Saturday morning I stood beside several other members of the Chatham County Historical Association in our booth at the Pittsboro Street Fair. We met and spoke with a number of interesting visitors, some natives and some recent arrivals to the county. Many enjoyed lifting the flaps to check the answers to the self-administered history quiz.

One rather aggressive person, who announced that he was a history teacher from northern New York State, and wanted to see how much Chatham history we really knew, interrogated us about pre-Revolutionary War activities in the area. When we answered that he was talking about the Regulator Movement and gave him back even more information than he wanted to know, the poor man left with his ego slightly deflated.

Another interesting visit was from a friendly gentleman who expressed appreciation for our working in the rain and presented each of the four of us with a dark green, baseball style cap, he had made. Each cap was embroidered with the word "Chatham" and the date 1770. The

date surprised us because the act establishing the county was passed in 1771.

One of the Historical Association's Board Members, Kay Judge, pointed out that the bill calling for Chatham County's formation was indeed introduced to the Colonial Assembly at New Bern on December 5, 1770, but because of distance-created communication problems it was only ratified on January 26, 1771, effective on April 1, 1771. So now I proudly wear my cap and have an answer if someone questions that date.

The ratified bill authorized the creation of a new county between Campbelton and Hillsborough by taking the southern part of Orange County. The new entity was to be called Chatham County and St. Bartholomew Parish. This dual designation conformed to the system of the Church of England and anticipated the church's growth within the Province of North Carolina, even though the nearest Church of England chapel to Chatham was in Chapel Hill. The St. Bartholomew's Church on Salisbury Street was built much later under a contract dated 1831.

The new county's principal legal Tribunal was the "Inferior Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions."

It met four times each year when the Justices of the Peace tried misdemeanors and certain civil actions. It also handled functions now performed by our County Commissioners and the Clerk of the Superior Court.

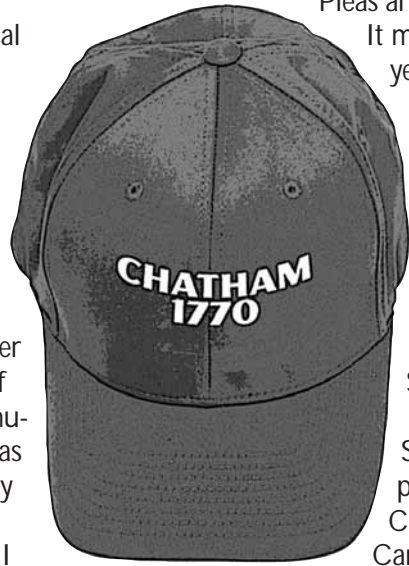
Until 1806 the Superior Court, presided over by the Chief Justices of North Carolina and his two assistants, met in Hillsborough twice a year and Chatham had to send jurors there.

Early sessions of the Inferior Court were held in the house of Captain Stephen Poe, until a wooden courthouse was built. When the county

government was moved to the new town of Pittsboro the original court house was moved to the west side of Hillsborough Street where it served for many years as a storehouse, meat market, and garage until the entire block was destroyed by fire in 1928.

Recently my wife and I moved to a retirement community in Burlington, Alamance County. However my love for Chatham and its people remains as strong as ever and we still spend a lot of time exploring Chatham. Hopefully I will be able to continue writing about the history of Chatham County and its remarkable people for many years to come.

Fred J. Vatter is Past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.



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