

Chatham has had its share of troubled waters

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



Last year's drought and the resulting restrictions on water consumption was a much needed reminder of the importance of a resource so often taken for granted.

From the very beginning water has played a major role in shaping Chatham's history and development. Its influence has ranged from beneficial to adverse.

During the early 1700's European settlers seeking land and independence came to Chatham by following the waters of the Cape Fear River, and by 1750-55 they were spreading into the valleys of its tributary network — the Deep, Rocky, Haw and New Hope Rivers. Among the earliest arrivals following the Cape Fear River were the Friends in the 1720's. Their descendants played a major role in the anti-slavery movement in Chatham.

Most streams, except the Cape Fear, had occasional shallows where horses and wagons could ford them. Traditional Indian paths, which were widened by the settlers to accommodate their wagons, often led to these crossing places. These spots provided water, fish, game and alluvial topsoil deposited by the streams during high water, which encouraged some

travelers to settle nearby.

The self-sufficient farmers grew corn, oats, and wheat for their own use and barter, and soon constructed water powered mills to grind their grain. These mills became social gathering places where farm families could meet to exchange news, political opinions, advice and gossip. The gathering of people encouraged the placement of other enterprises such as blacksmith shops and later cotton gins nearby. Little communities sprouted and eventually grew into towns.

The late Wade Hadley, writing in the Chatham Historical Journal dated January 1991, reported that a census taken in 1880 counted 43 water powered mills in Chatham County. These have mostly vanished, with some former mill sites marked by rock foundations, remnants of washed-out dams, and sometimes of raceways.

Mills were not always the serene scenes reflected in their impoundment ponds as depicted on picture post cards. They were frequently plagued by devastating seasonal floods and at other times could not operate because of an insufficient water supply in dry weather.

"Freshets," as torrential rain-caused floods were called, tore out dams, raceways and sometimes the mill structures, on a regular basis. Bland's Mill stood where the New



An 1880 census counted 43 water-powered mills in Chatham County.

Hope Dam now impounds Jordan Lake. It was partially washed away in 1880, was rebuilt, and shortly thereafter was swept completely away. Brown's Mill, located on the Haw River halfway between Bynum and the present Rt. 64 bridge, was also swept away twice. A similar fate was met by Willis Darks gristmill, and in later years nearby Pace's Mill was destroyed by a tornado which left its timbers in the tree tops.

A handwritten newspaper entitled "The Illustrated Sun", dated September 11, 1865 shows a sketch of Bynum's Mill and Bridge. Its caption indicates that "the bridge is a new one made by Mr. Bynum, the old one being washed away by the great freshet last winter which was the largest we have seen here in forty years."

An attempt to capitalize on Chatham's water resources was made in 1849 with the creation of the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company. Its vision was to facilitate travel from Randolph County, through Chatham, down to Fayetteville using a network of dams and locks.

The waterway hopefully would make it easier to transport Chatham's farm products and Deep River coal to Fayetteville and beyond, and allowing manufactured and imported goods to arrive on the return trip. The water route would hopefully eliminate an arduous trip by wagon via barely passable roads.

By the end of 1856 there were 13 dams and 14 locks on the Cape Fear River, and 6 dams and 8 locks on the Deep River. Work could only be performed during seasonally low water, and during seasonally high floods some locks were covered to a depth of ten feet or more. The wooden locks deteriorated rapidly and had to be continuously repaired and rebuilt when water levels permitted. Discouraged by the on again-off again employment opportunities, many workers preferred to labor on the railroads and plank roads instead.

Only a few successful passages were made by a company owned steamer, the "John H. Haughton", and the enterprise never had a period

of uninterrupted operation. Tolls were insufficient to cover costs and in 1859 there was a forced sale of the company's assets by creditors.

The State of North Carolina bought the company but the system was neglected during the Civil War and in 1873 any remaining assets were put up for sale. In the struggle between man and nature for control of the water, nature was again the winner.

One benefit of floods occurred near the end of the Civil War, when washed out bridges and raging currents prevented General Sherman's foraging army from entering Chatham to take what little food and supplies the locals had left.

The combined floodwaters of the New Hope, Haw, Deep, and Rocky River all flowing into the Cape Fear contributed to severe flooding problems downstream.

Congress authorized a study for flood control in Chatham back in 1919, but no action resulted until a devastating hurricane in 1945 sent a wall of water down the Cape Fear, raising it to 39 feet above flood level and causing severe destruction in Fayetteville.

Finally in December 1963 Congress authorized the construction of the New Hope Dam and Reservoir. It meant the relocation of many families whose roots were in the land for 200 years. Many protests and rallies erupted as forests were cleared, churches and homes were leveled or moved, and 1,944 graves in 43 cemeteries were relocated. Work stoppages because of litigation and construction problems at the dam caused the cleared land to vary from quagmire to dust bowl, depending on the weather. At last on September 1, 1981 the floodgates were finally closed and the reservoir, subsequently named Jordan Lake after its sponsoring Senator, began to fill.

In addition to flood control, Jordan Lane is also considered a water supply for adjacent communities, a control for water quality, a place for outdoor recreation and for fish and wildlife conservation.

When the project was first proposed, its opponents included Durham and Chapel Hill because they did not want to spend money upgrading their wastewater treatment. The discharged effluent flowed into tributary streams of the New Hope River. Now as the area has grown, the use of Jordan Lake as a source of drinking water has become more appealing.

Sewage treatment has improved but as the heavy spring rains have demonstrated, the tributaries feeding the lake still carry huge amounts of debris into its waters. How we and our local governments handle this problem will be recorded by future historians.

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

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