

Chatham's mysterious haunted corner

By Michael Pollock

When it comes to the paranormal, Chatham is a hot spot, and is home to a famous mystery spot, the Devil's Tramping Ground. The Tramping Ground is said to be a 40-foot-wide clearing with a perfect circular path about 20 feet around, free of any weeds, where the Devil allegedly paces nightly. It is said that anything left in the circle overnight vanishes, and that people who try to stay in the circle overnight experience something terrifying, Wikipedia to the contrary. It is in the southwest corner of the county, by Harpers Crossroads, an unincorporated town surrounded by goat and cattle pastures and woods. From the center of town, at the intersection of Highway 902 and Siler City-Glendon Road, turn north and immediately on the left is lonely Devil's Tramping Ground Road. Soon there is a gravel pull-off on the left, and the privately owned Tramping Ground is visible 40 feet up a path. Across the road and south saplings are growing on cut fields. There are a few houses, tracts of woods and woodlots, bean patches, an old sunflower field, and chickens and other fowl foraging along the road.

Unfortunately the Devil's Tramping Ground has lost its former glory. Recently I saw a circular area of disturbed soil with ash and bits of litter mixed in and a few sprigs of spurge, and no circle, assuming I found it. I had wanted to see the Tramping Ground for a long time, and want to believe it is mysterious, but it seemed no more eerie than any lonely woods, except for its reputation. The trail peters out further on, and I heard the sounds of kids beyond the woods. There were no birds, and reportedly animals avoid the Tramping Ground, but it was also a late summer afternoon when birds are quiet anyway.



In southwest Chatham lies a 40-foot-wide clearing with a barren circular path known as the Devil's Tramping Ground. Rumors and stories about the patch of land are rampant, especially around this time of year.

Surrounding it is an open, low forest of blackjack and Spanish oaks, Virginia pines, and red maples, over a thick green undergrowth of lowbush blueberries and greenbriars, and some devil's shoestrings, or goat's rue. Accounts often mention wire grass in the clearing, probably referring to the rushes of poor packed soil. All of this points to a possible explanation of the site. These plants and the vegetation of the region indicate poor, acidic soil. The soil at the Tramping Ground is white and probably poisoned with charcoal ash. A steady stream of visitors should keep it bare without paranormal intervention.

The best account is from John Hardens' *The Devil's Tramping Ground and Other NC Mystery Stories* in 1949. He might be the one who put the Tramping Ground on the map in NC lore. He recounts legends about the site being a Native American meeting place, or the grave of a Chief Croatan, of Lost Colony fame, or a treasure site, or just a former molasses mill. He mentions the hypothesis about salt, but tests conducted by The Avalon Foundation discount this. Hardens seems to be the source of the oft-quoted fact about sterile soil, but it sounds

like the tests meant that the soil is acidic and poor, not literally lifeless. The Avalon Foundation found that the ring, which existed in summer 2002, was unusual, low in carbon and minerals, and cucumbers did not sprout in its soil, but nothing else was unusual. Their musings on the meaning of the litter they found are hilarious.

The Tramping Ground is not the only strange phenomenon. According to Jim Brandon's *Weird America*, in the mid-1970s many 19-inch tracks appeared in the area, but trackers could

not corner the culprit. One hundred three-toed tracks, a common trait in Southern bigfeet, were found by Game Warden AC Goodwin, especially about a house by the Deep River. The phenomenon is far from confined to the Pacific Northwest's sasquatch.

In the great tradition of unusual things falling from the sky, in 1884, blood and flesh fell over a 60-foot rectangular area in a just-plowed field near New Hope Creek belonging to Silas Beckwith. The sky was clear, and the event was witnessed by the wife of tenant farmer Kit Lasater. Physician Sidney Atwater convinced Francis Venable, a chemist and later UNC's president, to examine the material and he concluded that it was indeed blood.

Chatham has magical sites and history North Carolinians should remember and preserve, before more sites are lost. If you have similar experiences to share, please email me at michael_pollock@yahoo.com.

Michael Pollock is a freelance writer living in southern Durham who founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch. He studied biology and anthropology at UNC and has an interest in Fortean phenomena.


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