

The Chatham Historical Journal

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A Vivian Cole Sampler*

The Washerwomen

Before rural electrification was extended into our area of the state in 1937, washday was a time dreaded by the whole family. Under the best of conditions it took most of the morning to get the washing done, so that meant the family was on "light rations" that day. If the day were rainy and/or cold, it could take much longer to finish the washing.

Clothes were sorted pretty much as they are today. The white ones were put into one of the two tubs that sat on the wash bench. It was filled with hot water from the wash pot, and a cake of home-made lye soap or a bar of brown Octagon soap was nearby. The soiled spots were rubbed with the soap, and then the garment was rubbed up and down on the scrub board until all spots were removed.

Following the scrubbing, the clothes were transferred to the boiling wash pot, which sat over a bed of red-hot coals or even a pile of blazing kindling. The water in the pot also contained soap or washing powder and also a stick with which the clothes were punched down into the boiling water. The colored clothes did not have to go through the boiling process.

The clothes worn by the men when they worked in the fields went through a pre-wash soaking before being washed on the scrub board. Then those clothes were put in the wash pot to boil, and a small amount of "Red Devil" lye sometimes was added.

From the boiling pot, clothes were put into the "first rinse" tub where the now slightly dirty water from the pot was washed out. The "second rinse" removed the last of the soap suds. Colored clothes were now ready to be hung on the line to dry unless they required

starch, but the white clothes had to go through a "bluing" rinse before they were starched and hung on the line.

In those days people used a towel a little longer, and changed clothes a little less often than now, but wash day was still a very busy day. If there were small children in the home, washing was an even bigger job. And I have not even mentioned the ironing, which had to follow. There were no wash-and-wear fabrics back then!

Because the laundry required so much of their time, many ladies hired washerwomen. These women usually were black, or "colored," as we respectfully said back then.

Some of them "took in washin'" to supplement the incomes of their poorly-paid husbands. Some washed because their husbands were "poley." "Poley" could mean sick, lazy, alcoholic, or abusive. And others washed to support their children because their husbands had died, had run off, were on the roads, or had never existed.

Our family was part of her family, as were all the families she worked for. Our joys were hers, and she also shared our sorrows.

The first washerwoman I remember was Aunt Laura, a short, heavyset lady who wore her hair in tiny braids or "pigtails" scattered about over her head. Also, I remember she always wore men's shoes. She didn't "take in washin'." Instead, she went out to work in the homes of "her ladies."

My first memory of Aunt Laura was a day early in June 1924, the day my little sister Elizabeth's body was brought to Papa and Granny's house to await the funeral. Aunt Laura was ironing in the kitchen. It must have been very hot, for she kept wiping her eyes and face with the skirt of her apron.

When the funeral director was ready for the family to

Vivian Cole grew up in northern Chatham County on the family farm near present-day Cole Park Plaza. Her reminiscences have appeared in several issues of the Chatham Historical Journal and CCHA Newsletter.

view Elizabeth's body, Aunt Laura went with us into the living room. While I was being held in Daddy's arms so I could see into the casket, I looked over at Aunt Laura. Even though Granny's living room was cool, Aunt Laura seemed to be perspiring more than ever. She was mopping her eyes and face with a bandana handkerchief. Our family was part of her family, as were all the families she worked for. Our joys were hers, and she also shared our sorrows.

Alice was the second washerwoman I remember helping Mother. She also came to our house to wash. She had two little girls who were near my age, and often she brought one and sometimes both of them with her. I loved playing with them, maybe because Alice always made them let me have my way when we played outside near her.

Luna and Sandy drove to town in a wagon every Monday morning. . . . On Thursday or Friday, depending on the weather, they came back to deliver the clean, ironed, and neatly folded laundry packed in a pillowcase or tied up in a sheet.

The first washerwoman we had who "took in washin" was Luna. She and her husband, Sandy, had a house full of children, and she needed the income from washing because Sandy was "poley" and unable to hold a job. I heard that he had TB.

Luna and Sandy drove to town in a wagon every Monday morning. They picked up dirty laundry from several ladies there, and, on the way home, they stopped by Aunt Jo's, Aunt Marilee's, and our house to pick up our laundry. On Thursday or Friday, depending on the weather, they came back to deliver the clean, ironed, and neatly folded laundry packed in a pillowcase or tied up in a sheet.

Each year when Luna had a new baby, her sister-in-law, Nora, took over her washing and ironing. I suppose Luna did the same for Nora when her babies were born.

Connie lived in one of Papa's tenant houses when she was our washerwoman. She came to our house and washed under the big cherry tree when the weather was nice. On the cold or wet days she moved her tubs inside the large garage. Connie also brought along some of her "chillen," but the larger ones had to help her with the washing. Often there was no one allowed to play with me until the washing was finished and Mother and Connie sat and talked a few minutes before she went home.

We had other washerwomen from time to time, but these stand out in my memory most of all. As laundromats became more numerous, some of the washerwomen began collecting laundry and taking it to the coin-operated machines. They could do laundry for several families on one day with much less hard work.

But then the country ladies began taking their own laundry to the laundromats. Also, more and more of them began buying their own washers and dryers. Now, those two appliances, once considered luxuries, are considered necessities in the home.

So progress and prosperity have removed the need for the old washerwoman. But perhaps it is just as well, for now it would be hard to find anyone willing to do all that work for any amount of money!

Tramps

As hard as life was here in rural North Carolina during the Great Depression of the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, we were told it was much worse in the cities and in the northern states. We saw no reason to doubt that since every Fall on an average of once each week some man walking down the road would stop at our kitchen door asking for food. They were on their way to Florida where they would gather fruits and vegetables for \$1.00 per day and would have no need for heavy winter clothes or have fuel bills to pay.

There were young men and old men; tall men and short; black men and white; fat men and those who were painfully thin. They may have travelled in pairs or groups, but, if so, they separated when they came to a house for only one man ever came to anyone's door. We called them tramps, and, while no one was ever sent away empty-handed, our mothers never let them inside the house.

If it were morning when they came, they received whatever was left from breakfast.

The food they were given was plain country "rations." If it were morning when they came, they received whatever was left from breakfast. If they were lucky it might be two or three sausage and egg biscuits, otherwise they might get only buttered biscuits with jelly or preserves.

The afternoon callers usually fared a little better, for our mothers cooked enough in the middle of the day to have leftovers for the evening meal. The biscuits given to the tramps usually were filled with vegetables, and, while there was rarely any meat, there often would be a piece of pie or cake. For whatever they were given,

the tramps thanked the ladies and went on their way. If they didn't like the food they may have thrown it away and tried again at the next house, but no one believed they did that.

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We heard terrible tales of things tramps had done to women and children a hundred or so miles from us, but I never heard of anything bad happening in our area. I recall only one occasion when Mother was frightened. Aunt Eva, her sister, was visiting, and the two were so involved in their conversation they did not hear the knock at the back door.

Casey, one of the dairy employees, came out the door of the milk house and saw this bearded man with a knife at his side opening the screen door to our kitchen. Knowing this was never supposed to happen, Casey yelled for him to stop. The man paused long enough to say he just wanted to see the Missus, but that was long enough for Casey to grab up some heavy tool used with the truck and run to the door. He warned the man if he took one more step into the house, he would hit him over the head with the tool. The tramp decided to back off and never threatened to use his knife.

The yelling attracted the attention of Mother and Aunt Eva, and, while Mother was a bit unnerved by what had happened, Aunt Eva was frightened out of her wits. Her three small children, Frances, and I were playing down around the feed barn. Aunt Eva rounded us up, brought us inside, and refused to let us outside again. She swore she would never live on a main road, and she never did!

The tramps who came to our house did not volunteer any information about themselves, and no one asked them any questions. Oh, one of the boys who worked at the dairy might say, "Where did you come from?" The reply might be Chapel Hill or as far away as Canada, and that would be the end of it.

There was one exception. Shorty came to our house in the Fall of 1927. I don't know if he told us to call him Shorty or if we called him that because he was a small man and we didn't know any other name to use. Shorty had worked at a dairy somewhere in the North, and he asked Daddy and Uncle Hugh if there were some work he could do for two or three weeks to get a little money before going on to Florida.

He told us he had a married daughter who lived near Buffalo, and I don't recall his mentioning any other

family. Shorty ate his meals with us, and after supper he would sit by the fireplace and recite poetry for Frances and me. He must have slept in the barn, for there was not room for him in either our house or Papa's.

Before he left he gave me a brooch which he had found on the road, he said. He called our attention to the place it was slightly bent, which he said was caused by a car running over it. It was the type of brooch my grandmother would have worn, so Mother didn't let me wear it, but I was as proud as punch to own it. My heart was broken when I lost it.

Many of those tramps who went south in the fall also made their way back north in the springtime. However, it seems to me not as many stopped by asking for food then. Maybe they had saved a few of those dollars they had earned and could buy food instead of beg.

I don't remember when the tramps disappeared from our roads and countryside. Perhaps it was with the increase of the public works and welfare programs. Over the years I have heard a lot of complaints about those programs, but to me it has always seemed better than begging. It is a very sad thing to see a grown man beg for food!

Chatham County Veterans of World War I

[Editor's Note: Two 1999 issues of the Chatham Historical Journal contained names of Chatham citizens serving in World War I. We are pleased to publish additions to the list as they are received.]



William Jesse Pennington

Pittsboro Tax List for 1876

Jane Pyle

A Pittsborough Town Commissioners' Book covering the years 1826-1878 is located on microfilm in the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The original book is missing from the town's collection of minute books, which begins with meetings in 1915.

Column headings are A) Names, B) Number of lots, C) Valuation, D) Polls, E) Personal Property, F) Goods of Merchants, G) Retailing [liquor], and H) Amount of Tax. Space permits only columns A-F.

Names	B	C	D	E	F
Alston, Mrs. Rue	3	650			
Burke, H. H.	7	1800		700	600
Berry, Mrs. W. F.	2	500			
Burnett, Lucien	1	200			
Cowan, Robert	1	500			5815
Doub, Peter	2	500	1	50	
Freeman, Frances	4.5	575		130	
Foushee, W. F.	2	1000			
Haughton, L. J.	1	125			
Henly, Stephen	1	200		800	
Harris, West	2	300			
Headen, James H.	3	700		475	
Headen, Aaron G.				400	
Headen, Bynum & Co.	2	1700			7000
Hanks, Kate W.	3	1000		300	
Hanks, John A.	1	50			
Heathcock, William	2	400		150	
Hall, Eliza	4	1200			
Jackson, J. J.	8	2200		1450	
Hanks, Martin	1	50			
Leach, J. Q. A.	2	1000			
London, William. L.	1	800			21087
London, H. A. Jr.	1	150	1	600	
Mallory, J. T.	4	4000	1	235	275
Montgomery, Eli	3	600		162	
Manning, John	1	200		600	
McClenahan, Waddy			1	150	
McClenahan, Margaret A.	5	600		200	
McClenahan, Dr. S. S.	7	900	1	185	
Moore, J. A.	3	500			
May, George W.	3	800			
Poe, Oran S.	5	2000	1	683	16334
Phillips, Irby	1	475		200	1238
Phillips, Mrs. Mary	2	800		100	
Patterson, William	1	300			
Ramsey, Miss Pattie	1	300			
Ramsey, Richard			1	25	
Ramsey, N. A.	5	1000			
Ramsey, Peter			1		
Reid, Miss Mary	2	1000		175	
Riddle, W. D. C.	1	200			

Names	B	C	D	E	F
Sutton, Robert B.	7	350			
Thompson, Nancy	2	800			
Thompson, Joseph	3	900		237	
Tinnin, F. J.	2	50			
Hanks, L.A. agent	3	900		200	
Straughn, William				1	
Hanks, L. A.				1	250
Hanks, J.A. & Son					895
Womack, Charles	1	150	1		
Webster, John G.				1	
Webster, Duncan				1	
Zimmerman, A. M.	1	400			275
Young, L. J.	1	750			
Cowan, Thomas					100
Harris, John	1	250			
Lanier, L. L.	3	1200			
Love, Robert estate	1	700			
Palmer, Mrs. Mat [?]	1	700			
Rogers, Mrs. Joana	2	300			
Marshall, M. M.	1	300			
Taylor, Mrs. W. P.	2	500			
Council, Geo.				1	
Jackson, Dallas				1	
Jackson, Bragg				1	
Hall, Fred				1	
Smith, Jack				1	
Sutton, Jake				1	

"Retailing" was taxed, at \$25, for two men, H. H. Burke and J. T. Mallory, who is shown in the census as a barkeeper. W. L. London and Oran S. Poe, leading merchants, were assessed taxes of \$13.13 and \$11.40 respectively. Taxes could be as low as \$.03; 29 persons had taxes under \$.50, while 30 had taxes between \$.50 and \$1.00 and nine paid over \$1.00. Aaron Headen was taxed only \$.24, for his personal property, while his business paid \$5.22. Total amount of taxes was \$141.92, with property valued at \$34,475.

The second group of names (Cowan - Thomas) may be property owners living outside Pittsboro. The Rev. M. M. Marshall had bought property for his mother on Salisbury Street, for example, but he lived in Raleigh.

Capt. N. A. Ramsey's 1870 map of Chatham County is the first large-scale map of the county. H. A. London Jr. was a lawyer who started publication of the *Chatham Record* in 1878. Dr. S. S. McClenahan and West Harris were dentists; John A. Hanks and son were physicians.

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