The Chatham Historical Journal

Graveyard Gleanings

by Keith J. Brown*

*Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.*
A Psalm of Life, H. W. Longfellow

While the grave may not be life's goal, it is the ultimate destination of the bodily shell that encompasses the soul. Few of us would go the extremes of the ancient Egyptians in preserving the memory of those who have passed on, but almost all of us expect some graveyard memorial, recording at the very least our names and our days upon this earth. For over fourteen years, the Chatham County Historical Association's cemetery project has been devoted to recording and preserving the information on the tombstones in our county; to date, we have more than 28,000 entries from over 300 cemeteries in Chatham.** We don't have room to discuss all the tombstones described in our database, but we can highlight a few of the more unusual ones and also uncover some interesting facts about our county and ourselves.

Cemetery Size (Number of Tombstones)

Of the 318 cemeteries currently in our database, eighty-two have 100 or more tombstones recorded in our survey. Two of the public cemeteries, Oakwood and Chatham Memorial Park, are among the largest, but Love's Creek Church takes the second spot with just under 1,000 burials. This list is also a religious atlas of Chatham County in miniature; Baptists and Methodists

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predominate, but there are also significant numbers of the United Church of Christ and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches. Central North Carolina's historical link with the Quakers is evident in the number of Friends' burials in the county, while Chatham's distinction of being home to the Christian Church through James O'Kelly is reflected in the number of that denomination's churches scattered throughout the county. The African Methodist Episcopal and Christian Methodist Episcopal churches, as well as separate public cemeteries such as Pittsboro Community Cemetery (formerly Pittsboro Colored Cemetery) attest to the effects of racial segregation on religious life through American history.

Largest Chatham County Cemeteries

Count	Cemetery	Count	Cemetery
1,372	Oakwood	362	Rocky River (Baptist)
996	Love's Creek	334	St. Bartholomew's
774	Chatham Mem.	330	Center
754	Olive Chapel	316	Haywood
750	Brush Creek	292	Pittsboro UMC
685	Mt. Vernon	291	Gum Springs
608	Sandy Branch	289	Antioch
586	Hanks Chapel	187	Bethany
575	Rocky River (Friends)	276	Bell's
551	Lystra	274	Evans Chapel
550	Mt. Gilead	267	Pittsboro (Baptist)
520	New Elam	261	Emmaus
495	Mt. Pleasant	258	Mt. Vernon Springs
465	Fall Creek	257	Mt. Pisgah
459	Asbury	254	Sandy Branch
458	Brown's Chapel	252	Bear Creek
431	Mitchell's Chapel	252	Tyson's Creek
423	Rives Chapel	241	Seymour
414	South Fork	239	Pittsboro
414	Carbonton UMC		Community
399	Goldston	239	Ebenezer
383	Hope	225	Lambert's Chapel
366	Pleasant Hill	220	Mann's Chapel

Family Names

Since the invention of writing, man has been putting his name on memorials, an instinct that shows no sign of abating. We currently have 1,966 different surnames

Lifespan in Chatham County

Most of these early Chathamites are buried in family cemeteries, but in contrast to the previous list, we find a number of people who lived into their seventies, eighties, or even nineties. At first, it might be surprising to see so many advanced ages so far back in time, given the relatively short life expectancy in those days, but this is obviously not a very representative sample. Most of these people would have been settlers in Chatham; they would have already survived the gantlet of childhood diseases before they arrived. While today we would expect to find more women than men surviving into their eighties or nineties, the obviously female names make up less than a third of this list, reminding us that childbirth and its attendant complications have been major killers throughout history.

While about one-seventh of the tombstones don't contain enough information to calculate a lifespan, an encouragingly high number of Chatham residents have met or surpassed their biblical "three score and ten," including over a thousand who lived to ninety or above. Some suspiciously high ages led to field checks by members of the cemetery project, which resulted in a much cleaner database.

Distribution of Age at Death

Age Category	Number	Percent
Unknown age	4,004	14.02
Less than a year	1,575	5.51
1-9 years old	1,342	4.70
10-19 years old	770	2.70
20-29 years old	1,182	4.14
30-39 years old	1,246	4.36
40-49 years old	1,565	5.48
50-59 years old	2,584	9.05
60-69 years old	4,150	14.53
70-79 years old	5,258	18.41
80-89 years old	3,841	13.45
90-99 years old	981	3.43
100+ years old	68	0.24
Total	28,585	100.00
Average	56.18	

Centenarians Recorded in the Survey

Of the sixty-eight centenarians we have in our database, Sallie Jones of Union Grove cemetery and Mary E. Thompson in Rocky River Friends cemetery are the oldest, at 110 and 108. If you'd like to join the century club, your best chance is as a member of Love's Creek Church (5 centenarians), Mitchell's Chapel (4), or Union Grove Church (4). Oakwood Cemetery in Siler City also has four people 100 years old or over. The table below shows the records for the oldest residents whose ages could be calulated from the available information.

Chatham County's Oldest Residents

Name	Born	Died	Age
Sallie Jones	1801	1911	110
Mary E. Thompson	1877	1986	108
Benjamin Johnson	1770	1877	107
Dillie Edwards	1858	1964	106
Elizabeth P. Mangum	1878	1983	105
Ann Ray	1855	1959	104
Alexander Graves	1886	1990	103
Patsy E. Brewer	1891	1995	103
Dallie M. Fike	1887	1991	103
Jessie E. Green	1892	1995	103
Fannie Rodgers	1886	1990	103
Ella W. Stone Vestal	1884	1987	103

Veterans Memorialized in Chatham Cemeteries

One part of the field researcher's task in conducting the cemetery survey is to note signs of military service on the gravestone. We have identified 1,590 individuals who served in some branch of the armed services throughout Chatham County's history. Since some people served during more than one war, if we look at military branch by wartime service, we have a total of 1,628 observations in our analysis. (See table below.) Nearly two-thirds of Chatham veterans served in the US Army, with the US Navy, the Confederate Army, and the US Air Force accounting for another thirty percent.

Among the remaining veterans, we have one member of the Australian Imperial Forces from World War II, Marcus Hilton Ollington, who is buried in Oakwood with the epitaph "A Sentimental Bloke." Martha Angie Phillips Moody also served in WWII, as a member of the Women's Army Corps. Charles R. Crofts, Sr., and Donnie Lofton Haithcox were members of the "forgotten force," the US Merchant Marines; during wartime, these mariners become naval auxiliaries. Thomas S. Durham served in the Confederate Navy, while Captain William Elias Boudinot served in both the US and Confederate Navies.

Epitaphs

While name and dates are the bare bones of a tombstone, it's the epitaph that fleshes out the skeleton of a life. This last word on one's life is most often chosen by those one leaves behind; the survivors are reflected in the large number of epitaphs that identify a family relationship, such as "Mother," "Father," "His

in our cemetery database, ranging from Abbott to Zarecki, including the inevitable misspellings. Nearly six hundred of those names appear on only one tombstone in the cemetery survey, while sixty-one names have one hundred or more gravesites attached to them. Many of the most common names are those that you'd expect to find on any list of popular surnames – Johnson, Smith, Phillips, Jones, and Williams. Not surprisingly, there are also a number of more localized names of long-time Chatham families, such as Alston, Brooks, Oldham, Womble, Siler, Horton, Hackney, Riggsbee, and Jordan. Just as their names appear on roads, towns, and other landmarks, they also have a tendency to appear on tombstones.

Frequently Recurring Surnames in Chatham Cemeteries

Count	Surname	Count	Surname
785	Johnson	215	Brewer
501	Smith	201	Siler
412	Phillips	197	Poe
345	Jones	193	Mann
344	Williams	188	Lindley
289	Clark	178	Wilson
287	Alston	176	Fox
284	Thomas	171	Edwards
279	Perry	171	Moore
264	Harris	163	Andrews
262	Brooks	163	Gunter
240	Oldham	162	Headen
239	Goodwin	158	Ellis
237	White	151	Taylor
218	Womble	150	Fields

Early Tombstone Dates

The most basic pieces of information on a tombstone, after the name (or initials) of the person whose grave it marks, are the dates. Seventeen year-old Hannah White of the Napton Cemetery has the earliest grave marker, dying only three years after Chatham County was created, and over 18 months before the Declaration of Independence was signed. She is one of twenty recorded burials before 1800. These earliest burials also provide a glimpse of the social habits of those days; of the twenty, fourteen were in private family graveyards. You might be born, live your entire life, die, and be buried on the same plot of land.

The three earliest burials in St. Bartholomew's Church illustrate one of the sad but common events of life before the discovery of sulfa drugs and penicillin; in less than five years, Colonel Edward Jones and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Mallet Jones, had and lost three sons. Two lived for six months, while the third survived only five days. They would later have a daughter who lived for about 18 months, and another son who would survive for 23 years. Edward and Mary Elizabeth outlived all five of their children. Even into the twentieth century, this would not be an uncommon pattern.

Records with Death Dates Before 1800

Name	Born	Died
Hannah White	1756	1774
Dr. James McCarroll	1734	1777
O. Dowd	-	1782
Capt. Alexander Clark	1747	1783
Plickard Dederic Siler	1719	1784
Amy Graves	-	1785
James Emerson	-	1786
Anne (Yeargan) Alston	-	1786
Henry Crutchfield	1743	1786
William Snipes	1735	1787
I. H.	-	1790
Sarah Evans Lindley	1743	1790
Sarah Snipes	-	1791
Peter Stephen Jones	1791	1791
John Willcox	1728	1793
Peter Duponceau Jones	1793	1793
John Haywood Jones	1795	1796
M. C.	-	1798
D. W. S. Edwards	1743	1798
D. W.	-	1799

If we turn our attention to birthdates rather than death dates, we find twenty-five people in our cemetery survey who were born in 1750 or before, with Plickard Dederic Siler leading the list. Siler and his wife Elizabeth, both born in Germany, were the progenitors of the Siler family in Chatham County, while Basil Manly's son Charles was elected governor of North Carolina in 1848. John Willcox operated an iron mine and furnace during the Revolutionary War, and Alexander Clark served as a member of the NC General Assembly and was county clerk of court during the American Revolution.

Records with Birth Dates of 1750 or Before

Name	Born	Died
Plickard Dederic Siler	1719	1784
John Montgomery	1722	1818
Elizabeth Hartsoe Siler	1727	1816
John Willcox	1728	1793
Mary (Willcox?) Montgomery	1733	1821
Dr. James McCarroll	1734	1777
William Snipes	1735	1787
Marjoria Buckingham Lindley	1736	1828
Mary S. Headen	1738	1819
Rev. James O'Kelly	1738	1826
Thomas Henry Rives	1740	1809
Thomas Lindley	1740	1833
Henry Bray	1742	1812
Basil Manly	1742	1824
Henry Crutchfield	1743	1786
Sarah Evans Lindley	1743	1790
D. W. S. Edwards	1743	1798
Phoebe Jefferson Clark	1744	1830
Phillip Siler, Sr.	1745	1834
Phillip Siler	1746	1801
Rebec Butler Willcox	1746	1808
Capt. Alexander Clark	1747	1783

Chatham Veterans by Branch and War

	Am Rev	Civil War	Span. Amer War	WWI	WWII	Korea	Vietnam	Unk.	Total
AIF*	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
CSA	0	174	0	0	0	0	0	0	174
CSN	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
CSN, USN	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
USA**	10	1	6	228	581	75	63	66	1030
USAF***	0	0	0	3	47	16	12	9	87
USCG	0	0	0	0	5	1	0	1	7
USMC	0	0	0	1	22	5	2	5	35
USMM	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
USN**	0	1	0	23	153	17	12	20	226
WAC	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Unknown	1	0	0	7	15	0	1	39	63
Total	11	178	6	262	826	114	90	140	1628

* Australian Imperial Force   ** Includes members of their respective services
*** Includes US Army Air Corps and US Army Air Force

Wife," "Sister," or "Brother." The most common epitaph, "Gone but not forgotten" sums up one of the main purposes of tombs throughout history – to provide a concrete point of memory.

Since death and burial have been seen as parts of a mystical cycle dating back before written history, it's not surprising that the vast majority of epitaphs have a religious nature. Biblical quotations, such as "Our Father which art in Heaven," "Not my will, but Thine be done," and "Blessed are the pure in heart" have long been popular. Another source of comfort to those left behind are such sentiments as "Asleep in Jesus," "Gone to be an angel," and "In God we trust," or lines from favorite hymns – "Precious Lord, take my hand," "When we all get to Heaven," and "Safe in the arms of Jesus." Given the relative newness of the song "Precious Lord," its high ranking in our list is surprising.

Some of the epitaphs compress a story into a few words. "Budded on earth to bloom in Heaven" almost always appears on the stone for a child who died early, often after only a day or two on this planet. Also common on children's graves is Christ's command to His apostles, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," words that are as comforting as possible for a couple who have seen their hopes dashed.

One epitaph that was undoubtedly complimentary at the time is "She hath done what she could;" its popular-ity ranged from 1877 to 1929. Today such a sentiment would be considered patronizing at the very least. Ironically, one of the first women in our survey to have this as her epi-taph was Mary Ruffin Smith, a benefactress of both the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina and the University of North Carolina; she hath indeed done what she could.

The popularity of certain epitaphs may be the result of stonecutters' ready-made memorials, but some of the most telling words are those that appear on only one or two stones. In the Cumnock Community Cemetery, there is a stone erected by the wife of George Monroe and the mother of T. S. Monroe, with the inscription "To my husband and son, killed by explosion." The Monroes were two of at least seven men in the Cumnock Cemetery who died 19 December 1895;* our survey doesn't record what happened to the widow Monroe after that date.

"Behold ye stranger Pass me by, As you are now So once was I, As I am now you may be, Prepare for death & follow me," found on the tombstones of Macole E. Stone and Oscar V. Smith, echoes the sentiments of Shelley's "Ozymandias." Isaac Newton Harris died fighting for the Confederacy; his footstone commands "Stranger go tell at Lacedaemon we died in obedience to her laws," the epitaph of the Spartans who slowed the Persian invasion of Greece at Thermopylae.

Appropriately, Kemp Wait Olive and Minnie Susie Olive of Olive Grove Baptist share the epitaph "Twins in life, twins in death." Born on 5 February 1903, Kemp died on 15 September 1903, and Minnie the next day.

Conclusion

These are only a few of the nuggets of information in the Chatham County Historical Association's cemetery survey. For over twenty years, this has been a work in progress; for many it has been a labor of love.

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*While seven victims of the explosion are buried in the Cumnock Community Cemetery, the final death toll was thirty-nine. See "Chatham County's Coal" by Wade Hadley, *Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, September 1993.