



# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## *Family and Farming in Chatham County*

by J. M. "Jim" Cooper

For many years farming was the livelihood of almost everyone living in Chatham County, and now very few depend on it solely for their living. My roots in Chatham County go back to Timothy Terrell, who received a grant from the Earl of Granville in 1752, the year Orange County was formed. The grant was near present-day Silk Hope, and little else is known about Timothy other than that he had a daughter named Millie who married Henry Crutchfield.

Henry Crutchfield came to Chatham County from Caroline County, Virginia, and settled in Chatham County soon after it was formed in 1771. Henry received a land grant in the Silk Hope area from the new State of North Carolina in 1780 for his service in the state militia during the Revolutionary War. His marriage to Millie Crutchfield produced eight children, and the seven boys and one girl was the ideal family make-up for a farm family back then. Henry died young in 1786. One of the wealthiest men in Chatham County at the time, his estate inventory listed six hundred acres of land, fourteen slaves, and considerable other personal property. Henry was my fourth-great-grandfather.

Henry's son Thomas lived in the Silk Hope area and had over 2,000 acres in his plantation. He also owned a number of slaves at the time of his death in 1844. With only one son and five daughters, his family was not a good shape for successful farming in those days unless there were also a number of slaves.

Thomas's daughter Millie was my great-great-grandmother. She received 375 acres from her father,

and after she died in 1853 this property was disposed of as stipulated in her father's will. The 375 acres were sold in 1854 and purchased by a Lindley. In 1856 her estate was divided among her children, four sons and five daughters from her marriage to Thomas Wright.

Thomas and Millie's oldest son, William Wright, was my great-grandfather. In 1857 he took his patrimony and purchased the John Holmes place, which was a short way east of Flint Ridge Methodist Episcopal Church in Albright Township (about to the Alamance County line after the line was moved south about two miles in 1896). William added to the farm until it contained 550 acres. His family consisted of two girls and four boys. There is no record that he owned any slaves before emancipation. Emancipation played havoc with large farmers, whose family makeup wasn't so important if they were wealthy enough to own many slaves or successful enough to own a few.

### **Industry Helps Break Up the Family Farm**

No sooner than recovering from the Civil War's destruction, farmers found another menace as the Industrial Revolution began sweeping the country, employing the farmers' young sons. In North Carolina, industry was mostly textile mills of every kind, like the one at Bynum in Chatham County and several up and down Deep River from Randleman to Coleridge in neighboring Randolph County.

By 1870 William Wright had lost three of his four sons to industry as they moved on just as soon as they were old enough to go it alone. William's youngest son and my grandfather, General W. Wright, inherited the farm. All of his sons were gone from the farm before they were twenty years old, leaving him there to work it alone or with the little help of his four daughters until they went to work in a Burlington factory. By 1929 he'd killed himself farming alone and with one sharecropper, leaving his widow to sell all 550 acres in 1932.

The pattern of my grandparents Charlie and Rosa Cooper is pretty much like that on my mother's side, all the way back to David and Nicholas Fox, who settled on

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*\*Jim Cooper has been a member of CCHA since 1990. A history and genealogy buff, Jim has published his research on the Indian Trading Path, North Carolina numismatics, and reminiscences about Staley and Chatham County.*



the South Prong of the Rocky River during the Revolutionary War. David and Nicholas Fox owned 1,600 acres and 2,000 acres respectively. David, who owned eight slaves, died in 1824, a wealthy man for the times.

Charlie and Rosa's family had seven boys and two girls, and all but two of them had left the farm by age 20. These two remained on the farm, tending the 375 acres as long as they lived.

### I Learn About Farm Work

I had cause to learn why so many young men left the farm. When I was ten years old, in 1930, I went down to my grandfather Cooper's farm in Chatham County, three miles out of Staley, where I lived for three years. I was their water boy during the summer, carrying water to them as they worked the fields all day. The days were long and the work was hard, as was all the work on a farm. You didn't ever seem to get caught up. Then, too, some summers the rain was plentiful and a good crop was the reward; other years were too wet or too dry, and very little was produced considering the work going into it. In the good years grandfather would sell lots of cotton. He and my uncle also had a route in White Oak mill village in Greensboro, which they made every other Saturday selling farm produce.

However, neither his sons nor I ever saw any of the money, other than what was spent on us for subsistence, and I'm here to tell you that there was work to do on the farm 365 days a year although we worked the fields only five days a week. So why should a young man stay around just to work any such way for nothing when they could get paid at a job? It was an experience that I'll remember as long as I live.\*

After 1900, when electricity began replacing water and steam as power to run a factory, mills could be built miles from a riverbank. Mills like Cannon Mills in Kannapolis were built out in the middle of fields miles from a river. Farmers' sons flocked to the mills all over the state because they were used to hard work, and they would get paid for it. However small it was, the pay was better than nothing.

### Clearing and Improving the Land

The earliest settlers in what is today Chatham County found fertile land in most parts of the county. However, as time passed, they needed more cleared land. The task of clearing included removing all stumps and plowing the new ground – no easy task in the earlier days before modern machinery. One way of removing stumps was to pile the tree brush around the

*\*(A few years back I wrote an article about my experience on the farm, which Milburn Gibbs published in a book, Staley School: A History of a Community, that pretty well details farm life before motorized machinery took over and modern conveniences were available down on the farm.)*

**CROP LIEN.** Form No. 33

State of North Carolina:

The NAVASSA GUANO COMPANY of Wilmington, a Corporation of said State, hereby agrees to advance and furnish to O. H. Cooper of the County of Chatham in said State, from time to time during the present year, such amount of Fertilizers, not exceeding Three tons of Ammoniacal Guano, one ton of Superphosphate, and one ton of Cotton Fertilizer, as he may require to enable and assist him to make and cultivate the crops on the lands here cultivated and to be cultivated during the present year by himself in the County of Chatham in said State, and the said O. H. Cooper promises to pay to said Corporation on the 1st day of Sept next, not exceeding the sum of Five Dollars for each and every ton of Cotton Fertilizer, and not exceeding the sum of Five Dollars for each and every ton of Acid Phosphate, delivered and furnished to him during the present year by said Corporation, in pursuance of this agreement; and in consideration of said advances, to be made as aforesaid, and as security for this agreement, and for the prompt payment of the amounts which shall be due and owing for said advances, the said O. H. Cooper hereby gives and grants to the said Corporation, a Lien upon all crops of every kind cultivated, grown or planted by him during the present year on the lands aforesaid, pursuant to the Act of the General Assembly of this State in such cases made and provided.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the said Corporation hath caused this agreement to be executed in its behalf by H. C. Causey its Agent, and the said O. H. Cooper hath hereunto set his hand and seal, this 20th day of April 1930.

Navassa Guano Company  
By its Agent: H. C. Causey

Witness: J. T. Taylor & H. C. Causey

This agreement shall be filed and signed before a Justice of the Peace, and the Agent must sign on the back hereof the date of filing. Notarization is unnecessary.

The number of tons within the above blanks should cover all the probable needs of the Farmer during the season, and the execution price should be also put in. The notes taken subsequently show the number of tons and the price to be paid.

stump and leave it until it dried out, then set it afire. If rain didn't put the fire out, the stump would eventually burn up.

My grandfather's farm had fields named for the person who cleared or helped clear them, such as the "Jake" field, cleared many years earlier by Jacob Fox, the farm's owner; "Zeno," new ground named after Zeno McBane, who helped his father clear it; and the "Gas" field and "Long Bottom" along Big Branch. Last was the "Flint Hill," five acres of new ground that my uncles and I cleared while I was staying with them in the early 1930s.

In the early 1800s there had begun a migration of second and third generation Chathamites, who moved westward to fertile virgin land across the mountains in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and points westward. They moved because much of Chatham County's cleared land was losing its fertility from being farmed to death, and the only nutrient the farmer had to replenish it was manure from their stables, which was never enough to do the job. This situation changed when cheap fertilizer arrived by rail.

In the 1880s the Atlantic & Yadkin railroad was built from Fayetteville to Greensboro across the western side of Chatham County and through Randolph County. That railroad provided the Navassa Guano Company of Wilmington a cheap way to get its guano to farmers. H. C. Causey, the railroad depot agent at Staley, was also the dealer there for the Navassa Guano Company in 1886. My grandfather, O. H. Cooper, was a Civil War veteran trying to rebound from the devasta-



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coming back with fifteen or twenty bags of fertilizer for the summer crop. We were probably planting more acreage than O. H. did, but the ground required more fertilizer under each hill to get good results. It was the only way you could make the land productive again after being farmed so long.

**The End of the Cooper Family Farm**

My grandfather's 375 acres were divided in 1942, when he gave each of his two sons a parcel of it to exempt them from the World War II draft. The remaining acres were sold in the settlement of his estate after his death in 1965. A son in Washington, D.C. purchased a good part of it but sold it off in the 1980s. No part of the farm is in the family today.

tion of Reconstruction on his farm in Chatham County, three miles east of Staley. On 30 April 1886 he purchased two bags of guano from Mr. Causey for \$6.80, giving Causey a lien on his entire crop to back up the loan until harvest time. Those were pretty hard times for a farmer in Chatham County.

When I was living on the farm in the early 1930s, I remember my uncle taking the wagon to Staley and

**Rosenwald Schools in Chatham County**

by Jane Pyle

Julius Rosenwald, whose formal education stopped after two years of high school, invested in Richard Sears' mail order business in the early 1890s; twenty years later he was president of Sears, Roebuck & Co. In 1917 he incorporated the philanthropic Rosenwald Fund and in 1928 relinquished direct control to a board of trustees and a full-time staff headed by Edwin R. Embree, whose account of the foundation, *Investment in People*, provides a firsthand history of the contribution of more than \$25 million to the education of rural southern African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Embree reports that of 5,000 rural schools in the South benefitting from the fund, North Carolina had a total of 813 buildings with a capacity for 114,210 pupils and costing \$5,167,042.

W. F. Credle, supervisor of the Fund in North Carolina, described the Rosenwald plan as providing a grant to a rural community to build a public school for Negro children on the condition that the Negroes of the community provide cash, land, or labor; that grants come also from white friends or from public funds; and that the title to school property be vested in the public school system.<sup>2</sup> The buildings had no uniform style, although plans were available from the Fund, and the finished school had to be approved by an inspector. Each school was to provide room for a shop or home arts classroom, and each school was to have two acres set aside for a farm garden.

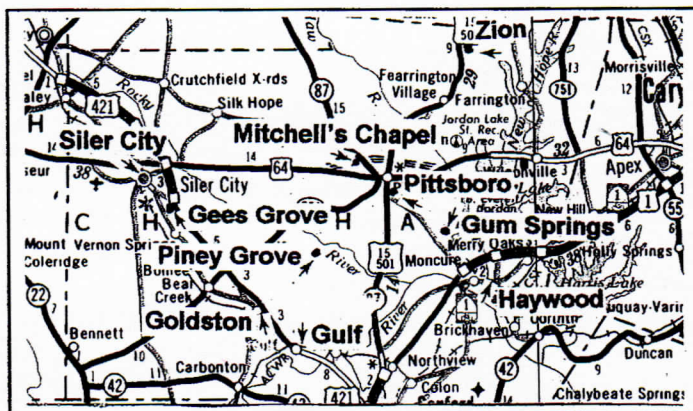
Embree reports that between the beginning of the program until April 1929, Chatham County had received six buildings with seventeen classrooms and a pupil capacity of 765, at a total cost of \$21,833. This

total represents contributions of \$6,400 from blacks, \$9,233 from public funds, and \$5,200 from the Rosenwald Fund. From available financial reports of the Chatham County superintendent of schools, funds received from the Rosenwald Fund totaled \$1,900 in 1923-24; \$900 in 1926-27; \$200 in 1928-29; \$400 in 1930-31; \$2,000 in 1931-32, and \$4,000 in 1932-33.<sup>3</sup>

Details about individual schools in Chatham County are scattered and incomplete. I have identified ten schools that were supported by the Rosenwald Fund, mostly with funds for construction. Information here was collected from the North Carolina Archives; minutes of the Chatham County Board of Education and reports of the Superintendent of Schools; deeds in the Chatham County Register of Deeds office; interviews; and published books or articles.<sup>4</sup>

\*Gees Grove<sup>5</sup> was a three-teacher school begun in 1926, probably sponsored by the church community. A letter from W. R. Thompson, superintendent of the Chatham County schools, to W. F. Credle in December 1925 describes the project:

... the colored people have agreed to furnish all rough lumber and place all the lumber and material on the



Rosenwald Schools in Chatham County



ground and also to furnish two helpers during the construction of the building. The County Board of Education agreed to furnish weather boarding, ceiling, flooring, roofing, windows, doors, ect [sic] and to pay for the construction of the building.

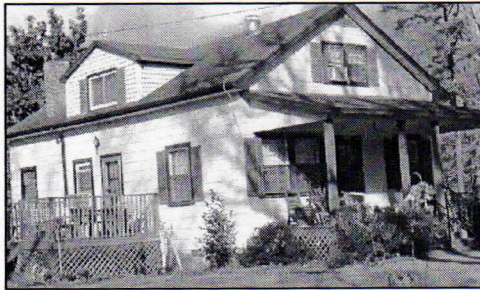
We have a good man who is also a good carpenter in that community ... Mr. Brewer, who has charge of the work, has the plans and the blue print ... it is the three room building to face either East or West.

The Rosenwald Fund followed with \$900 in February 1927.

\*Goldston School may have received support for a school at the present location of J. S. Waters School. The county school board minutes record a 1935 resolution to build a six-room building for \$5,000, but the only direct reference to the Rosenwald Fund that I found was the listing of Goldston as an applicant for the "elementary set" of books for the library costing \$36, of which the Fund would have contributed \$12.

Gulf School's location is unknown; it might have been located near Macedonia Church. A report from the state board of education for 1929-1931 has an entry dated 30 June 1931 for \$400 for Gulf school construction.

\*Gum Springs School was built in 1924 as a one-teacher school, and the building was sold in 1948 to Wesley and Susie Perry Thomas, who made it their home. Mrs. Perry attended the school before transferring to Horton High School. I believe it is the only



The home of Wesley and Susie Thomas, formerly Gum Springs School

Rosenwald School still standing, but part of the Haywood School may be connected to Rose Hill Church.

Correspondence in 1924 between Credle

and S.L. Smith in the Nashville office relates that the building was found on inspection to be five feet too short and the windows were on the wrong side. After receiving a photograph, Smith called the building attractive and thought aid could be sent if the desks were placed to face the door so that children would receive light on the left side. Subsequently, \$400 was transmitted from the Fund.

\*Haywood - Land for a school was sold by Elias Bryan to the colored school committee in 1869 (Deed Book A-O, p. 52), and a four-teacher Rosenwald School was erected at this location about 1921.

\*Mitchell's Chapel was a three-teacher Rosenwald School, built here in 1922 and sold back to the church in 1945.

\*Piney Grove - A deed (Book JO, p. 42) involves the sale in 1946 for \$625 of an abandoned school known as Union Grove. The change of name occurred some time between 1946 and 1923, when the county received \$300 from the Rosenwald Fund.

\*Pittsboro Colored School, later to become Horton High School and now Horton Middle School, was funded in 1923 and 1924 from the Rosenwald Fund for a four-teacher school. The total amount granted is unknown, but payments of \$1,100 are documented.

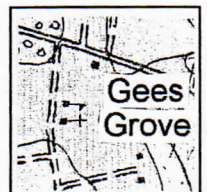
\*Siler City Training School, later renamed Chatham County Training School, Chatham High School, Chatham Middle School, and currently Sage Academy, received \$2,000 in 1932, soon after the Rosenwald Fund began supporting high schools outside rural areas.

\*Zion - In 1929 a letter from the state board of education to the superintendent of Chatham County schools referred to a check for \$200 for Zion School. The abandoned Mt. Zion school was sold in 1941 for \$90.

Much work remains to be done to discover the extent of Rosenwald Fund support of education for African Americans in Chatham County. It may be too late to learn how funds were raised or how the school authorities were persuaded to match local contributions, but oral histories can still be collected from men and women who attended Rosenwald Schools.

#### NOTES

1. Edwin R. Embree and Julia Waxman, *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1949).
2. W. F. Credle, "The Julius Rosenwald Fund in North Carolina," *North Carolina Teacher*, Vol. 1, No. 10 (c.1925), p. 287, 291.
3. Financial Reports of Superintendent of Chatham County Schools, loose papers in Board of Education minute book.
4. Archival documents were used from files of the Division of Negro Education/Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education. Other sources include: Chatham County Register of Deeds; Thomas W. Hanchett, "The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. LXV, No. 4, October 1988, p. 387-444, and brief interviews with Susie Thomas (Gum Springs), Robert Laney (Zion), and Parker Price (Gees Grove). I appreciate Margaret Pollard's arranging these interviews. A statewide project in the State Preservation Office, Division of Archives and History, collects data about Rosenwald Schools; project search forms for Chatham County schools are on file there and in the Chatham Historical Museum.
5. An asterisk preceding a school name indicates that a school location was found on a 1933 map in R.C. Journey et al, *Soil Survey of Chatham County*, US Dept. of Agriculture, Series 1933, No. 7.



Gees Grove School and Church<sup>5</sup>