

The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 4, Number 2

Chatham County, North Carolina

June 1991

THE CHATHAM COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Wade Hadley

When completed it will present quite a stately appearance and while not so costly or handsome as some of the court-houses in the State it will rank among the first as a comfortable, commodious and convenient building.

Chatham Record, June 15, 1882

The Chatham County Court House¹, built in 1881-1882, has recently been extensively renovated. A few notes concerning the construction of this courthouse may be of interest in view of this renovation.

By the late 1870s, the Chatham County courthouse that had been built in 1843 was beset with problems and subject to myriad complaints. The situation was recorded in a series of articles in the *Chatham Record*, starting in 1878.² The courtroom was found to be deficient in capacity and comfort in a Grand Jury report. Others reported that room as having scarcely any seats and as being poorly ventilated: "a perfect oven in warm weather and in winter very cold." For some time the brick walls of the courthouse had been cracking badly, and by January 1880 work was in progress to prevent further cracking. It had become apparent that the courthouse was in a dangerous condition. It had been poorly constructed: the foundation was faulty, the sand used was half dirt and mud, and some of the bricks had been laid with mud instead of lime mortar.

In February 1881 a petition was presented to the County Commissioners asking them to request Chatham's members of the state legislature to secure passage of a bill authorizing county bonds to provide money for a new courthouse. On March 5, 1881, the General Assembly ratified an act enabling the Board

Association minutes for May 17, 1966, show that Emily Brower (Mrs. C. Roddy Brower, president) proposed the raising of funds by selling notepaper. She was authorized to do this, and she reports that she sent a photograph of the courthouse to a specialty printer in Wisconsin, where we assume a staff artist prepared the sketch. By mid-November 1966 the notepaper had shown a profit of \$80.18, and in late September 1973 notepaper was still available at \$1.25 a box.

of Justices of Chatham County to build a new courthouse and to issue county bonds not in excess of \$12,000. The bonds were to bear interest at 6% per annum and to run for ten years.

On May 18, 1881, the Board of County Commissioners announced that sealed proposals for building a new courthouse in the town of Pittsboro would be received until noon on June 7, 1881. Plans and specifications for the courthouse were drawn and prepared by T. B. Womack of Pittsboro.

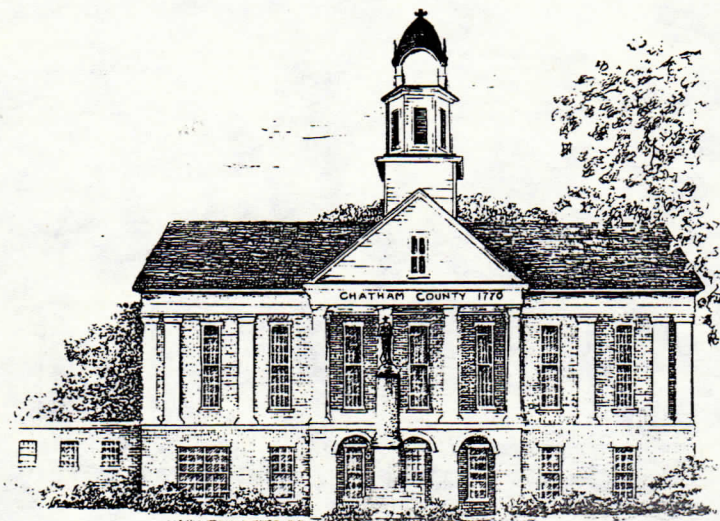
The bid submitted by Alvis J. Bynum and William L. London ("to build Court-house with present Court-house given to us [for] \$10,666.00 . . . we propose to have work done of best materials as contemplated in specifications and in good workmanlike style"³) was accepted by the Board of Commissioners and the contract was awarded to them on June 7, 1881.

Some of the specifications for the construction were:

Excavations. . . "The foundation trenches will be dug to the depth required by the nature of the ground to secure permanency to the building. . ."

Brickwork . . . "The brick for the entire building will be local made except so much of the good serviceable brick as may be taken from the old building.

(Continued on next page)



Chatham County Courthouse

Pittsboro, North Carolina

. . . a good run of the kiln being required with none except hard burned brick to be used below the ground floor or in any exterior wall, *provided* that not more than one third salmon brick will be used in any interior wall. . .”⁴

Mortar . . . “The mortar for the entire building will be composed of fresh burnt rock lime and clean sharp sand, properly proportioned and mixed in proportions not to exceed 4 of sand to 1 of lime. . .”

Washboards . . . “Washboards 10” wide with a neat 2” moulding at the top will be put on in all corridors, vestibules & rooms, except in the court room where the public seats rest against the wall.”

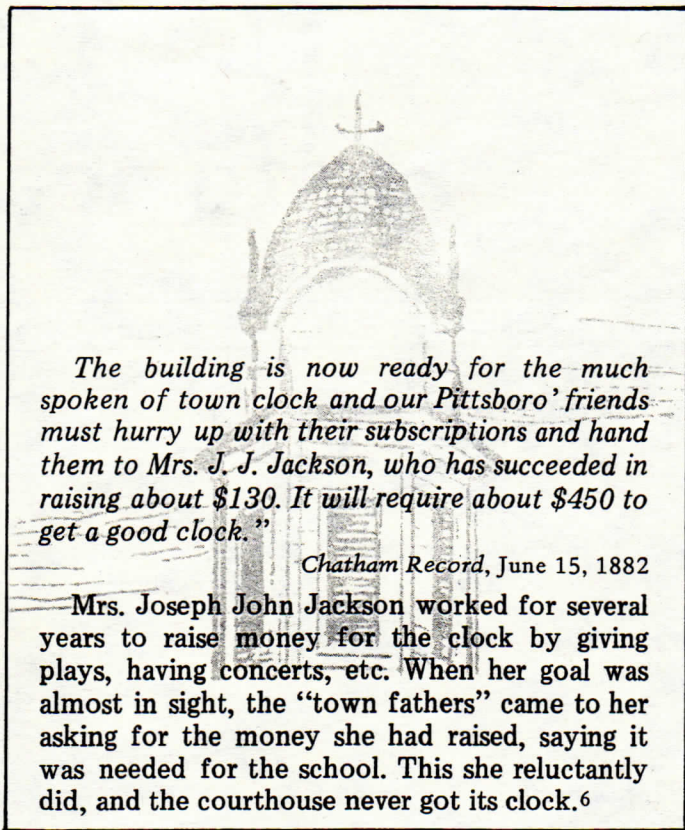
Flooring . . . “All floors will be 1¼” x 5” well dressed long leaf heart pine, tongued & grooved & blindnailed.”

Cupalo . . . “will be constructed as indicated on detail drawings. Pilasters will be of 2” x 12” well dressed plank. It will have an iron weather vane on the top at least 5’ high of such design as may be agreed upon. The circular portion above the space left for face of clock will be surmounted with an iron bracket of design somewhat similar to one shown in elevation. . . The cupalo will be thoroughly braced in all directions.”

Plastering . . . “The bolt, pilasters, caps over arched doorways & window finish & columns & entablature of the front projection will be covered with best outside plaster work accurately & neatly finished & marked to represent stone.”

Painting . . . “All the wood work usual to paint will have three coats of best lead & oils of such tints as the superintendant may select. The trimming will have two coats of best metallic paint. The different rails, ballusters, newels &c. will have two coats of oil and one coat of varnish.”

Well . . . “The old well will be filled with the rubbish from old building, & should any wall come near it the utmost caution will be taken to avoid danger



The building is now ready for the much spoken of town clock and our Pittsboro’ friends must hurry up with their subscriptions and hand them to Mrs. J. J. Jackson, who has succeeded in raising about \$130. It will require about \$450 to get a good clock.”

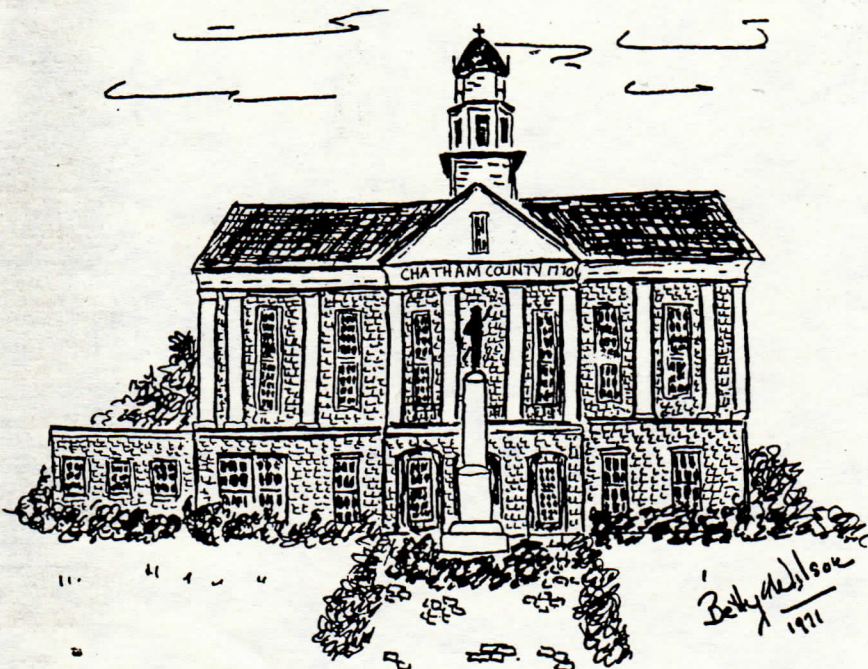
Chatham Record, June 15, 1882

Mrs. Joseph John Jackson worked for several years to raise money for the clock by giving plays, having concerts, etc. When her goal was almost in sight, the “town fathers” came to her asking for the money she had raised, saying it was needed for the school. This she reluctantly did, and the courthouse never got its clock.⁶

to the walls. Should any wall pass over the well it will be done with a sufficient & strong arch.”⁵

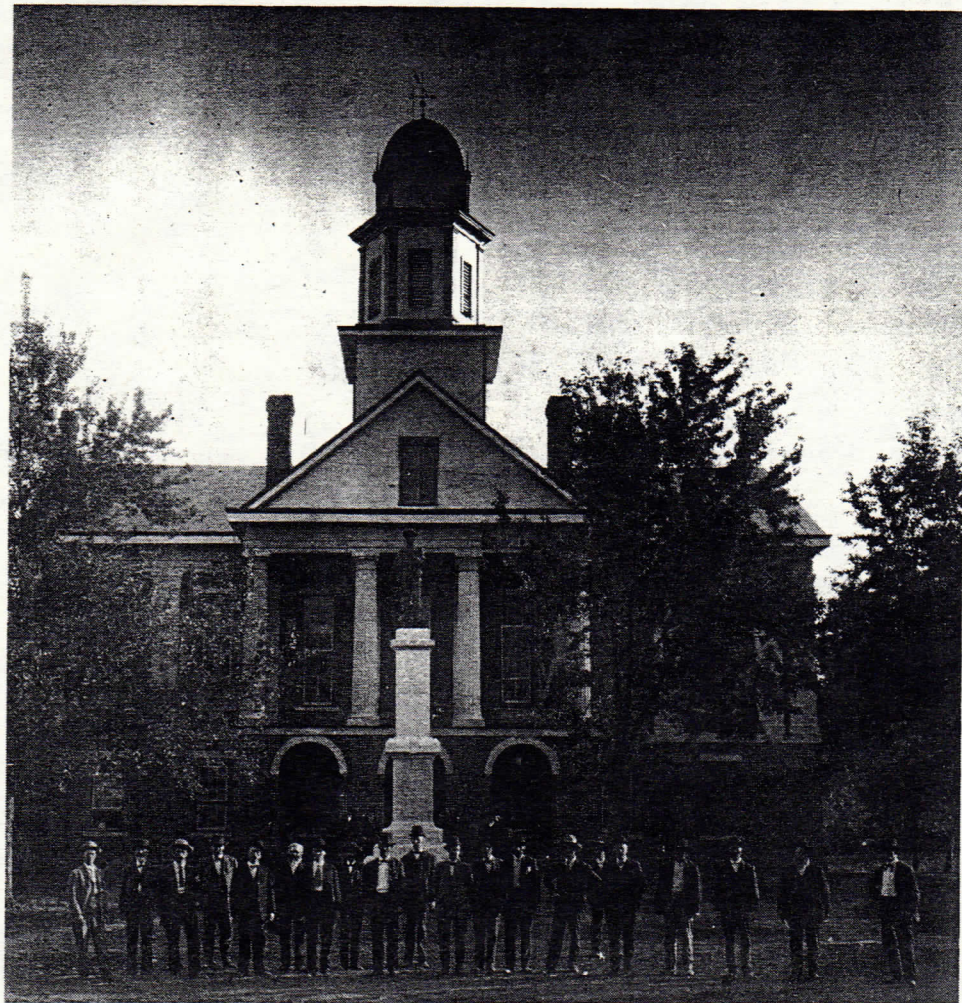
Vaults . . . “will have two doors each, both doors of one vault & the outside door of the other made of boiler iron. The outside door of the other vault will be of iron with a good combination burglar-proof lock. The other outside door be supplied with a good substantial “Yale” lock.”

The contract included the following conditions. All brickwork was to be completed by October 15, 1881, and the plaster work by December 1, 1881. The building was to be completed by January 1, 1882. Later this schedule was revised.



Original sketches of the courthouse, Masonic Lodge, and St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal church were drawn by Betty Wilson (Mrs. Noah R. Wilson III) for the county bi-centennial of 1971. Reproduced for sale during that celebration, the drawings were donated to the Association, with proceeds designated for the museum fund. A limited supply of prints is still on file. (Reproduced at 60% of print size)

Discovered at a flea market in Greensboro by A. L. Honeycutt, Jr., of the state's division of archives and history, this photograph is undated and the men unidentified. Any information about the men or occasion commemorated in the photograph will be of great interest, and we hope it will be forwarded to the Association. Even a date of when the trees around the courthouse were cut would help to bracket the age of the photograph.



The commissioners were to pay the contractors as the work progressed: \$1,000 upon completion of each stage of building the walls — to the ground floor, to the second floor, and to the ceiling of the second floor; \$2,000 upon completion of the building; and the remaining upon receipt of the building by the Board of Justices. The first and one-half of the fourth payment were to be made in cash and the remainder in cash or county bonds; this meant that only \$2,000 of the total cost had to be paid in cash by the county.

The work of tearing down the old courthouse started on Monday, June 27, 1881, and by December 15, 1881, all brickwork was finished and the roof was being put on. When the roof was completed, work was suspended until "toward spring" as it was considered not prudent to plaster the walls during cold weather. The commissioners received the new courthouse on July 4, 1882, and it was occupied soon after that date.

On September 1, 1881, members of Columbus Lodge 102 laid a cornerstone at the new courthouse. The cornerstone is on the southeast corner of the building and bears only the date 1881. In it were placed a brass plate engraved with the names of the architect, contractors, and superintendent of construction, who was John A. Pugh. A brass plate and copper cent found in the cornerstone of the old courthouse were also placed in it.

While the old courthouse was being torn down in 1881, its cornerstone was opened. It contained a brass plate, 3½ inches by 6½ inches. One side were the names of the Masonic officers who laid the cornerstone: J. J. Brantley, Master; W. S. Gunter, Senior Warden; and William Stedman, Junior Warden. On the other side were the names of the building

committee: H. A. London, J. Bynum, C. Lutterloh, and I. Burnett. There was also a letter by William Stedman dated July 20, 1844, and one copper cent. The cornerstone was said originally to have contained a gold dollar, silver sixpence, dime, quarter, half-dollar, and dollar. The rumor was that the day after the cornerstone was put in place, it was opened and all the coins except the copper cent stolen. ■

NOTES

¹Old records refer to the building as Court House; later it was customary to refer to it as Court-house. Except for quotations, I use the unhyphenated standard spelling.

²Acknowledgement is made of James Vann Comer's listing of *Chatham Record* articles referring to the courthouse from 1878 through 1881 (12 Dec 78, 3 Apr 79, 24 Jul 79, 15 Jan 80, and in 1881: 10 Feb, 10 Mar, 17 Mar, 24 Mar, 7 Apr, 19 May, 9 Jun, 30 Jun, 14 Jul, 11 Aug, 25 Aug, 1 Sep, 3 Nov, and 15 Dec). No further article reports progress until June 1882, when the building was nearing completion.

³A copy of the announcement calling for bids, proposal, acceptance of bid, and specifications is found in Book BC, Record of Deeds, pages 216 - 227.

⁴A paragraph describing the kiln-burning in August 1881 was printed in *The Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, August 1989.

⁵A contract to dig a well midway between the new courthouse and the jail was let to Thomas B. Fowler at \$1.75 per linear foot. The jail had been built in 1878.

⁶*Chatham Record*, September 20, 1962, p. 3E

ONE OF THE FIRST ITINERANT PREACHERS
TO PREACH IN THE
NEW COUNTY OF CHATHAM

J. M. Cooper

The Reverend George Soelle, a Moravian preacher, arrived in Salem, North Carolina, in 1769, as an itinerant preacher for the Moravian settlement. At first he served the lightly populated settlements within Wachovia that didn't have a church and couldn't support one. His meetings were always held at the home of a prominent person of the neighborhood. But soon demands were being made for his services by settlers outside Wachovia, as preachers were very scarce on the North Carolina frontier at that time.

Reverend Soelle began serving settlers as far north as lower Virginia, west to the mountain foothills, south to the Yadkin River, and east to the Jersey and Abbots Creek settlements in eastern Davidson County and the Carraway Creek and Polecat Creek settlements in present-day Randolph County. On the latter trips it appears that he traveled the Salisbury Road to the Trading Ford, where he picked up the old Indian Trading Path and traveled it to Polecat, where he picked up the Salem to Fayetteville road back to Salem.

On one such trip, in August of 1772, according to the Reverend Soelle's diary,¹ Reverend Soelle departed Salem and served first a meeting of Germans at Belows Creek. Then continuing on the road to Alamance, he spent the night with Rudolph Andreas. The next evening he reached the Buffalo settlement, mostly Presbyterians, where he preached and spent the night with David Care. After finding his strayed horse the next morning, he rode the next three miles with Ludwig Eisele (Isley) of the Alamance settlement to Jacob Christmann's, where he preached and spent the night. The next morning on his way to David Lau's,² he got lost and came out on the old Indian Trading Path, where later the Battle of Alamance was fought. From Lau's he traveled to Sutor's⁴ where Sutor spoke first, followed by Soelle.⁴ Now comes his visit to Chatham County.⁵

Then Soelle set out for Rock River, to visit the Baptist preacher, Syms. In March this man Syms and two others were in the Salem Brothers House, having stopped there to buy some food. As they were in the kitchen Soelle chanced to step in, and began to talk with them about the new birth of the heart, when Syms exclaimed: "Thanks be to God that I have found a child of God in this house!" He also begged Soelle to visit him. After a trying day, in which Soelle rode eighteen miles searching for his home, he at last reached his destination, and was made heartily welcome. "He is a very poor man, for it is the custom and rule of the Baptists not to pay their preachers, and they must support themselves by the work of their own hands, in spite of the fact that they must visit and serve the people committed to their charge. Some of the members do not approve of this." With Syms' approval Soelle held a meeting for the German-

speaking settlers at the home of a man named Seiler, who knew some of the Brethren, especially Schaub; Syms accompanied Soelle to this meeting, and followed his address with a few words begging those present to let the words sink into their hearts and take root there.

Next day Seiler took him two miles to the "big road" to Carraway Creek, but the way thither was so long that Soelle had to spend the night en route, finding a lodging "bad enough and dear also." In the morning he passed through Poolcats Settlement, where all the corn was ruined. A storm forced him to stop at a house, where he found a woman who had heard him preach on Carraway; and another woman and a boy came in who showed him the way through the woods to the home of the elder Breiel.

He went six miles to the home of George Hermann. Muster was being held at John Kimborough's house, and hearing that Soelle was there Kimborough announced to the company that Soelle would hold a service on the following day. . . . [The day after that] Soelle returned to Salem.

NOTES

¹*Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, edited by Adelaide L. Fries, Vol. II (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, reprinted 1968), pp. 784 - 807, material quoted on pp. 800 - 801. Soelle's diary of his pastoral tours begins with March 23, 1771, and ends with April 12, 1773, and consists of about two hundred closely written pages of German script. It gives the story of his movements from day to day during that time - where he went, with whom he talked, what he preached, and all the little incidents of the way. The translator summarizes the entries and writes in the third person.

The Rev. George Soelle was born in Denmark in 1709 and ordained as a Lutheran minister in 1741. In 1753 he received a call to America and preached in various places in Pennsylvania. In 1770 he moved with several families to Wachovia, where he died in 1773. [*Records*, pp. 804 ff.]

²This was in southeast Guilford County, where the present-day Lau Church stands.

³Samuel Suther was a Lutheran minister who left Coldwater Lutheran Church in Cabarrus County in 1771 to serve four congregations in the Stinking Quarters section of Orange County for four years.

⁴This meeting was at the present-day Richland Lutheran Church site near where the Randolph, Guilford, and Alamance County lines meet.

⁵The Baptist preacher, Syms, was pastor of the Rocky River Baptist Church, which was organized by the Rev. Shubael Stearns about 1757. The meeting for the German-speaking settlers was at the home of Plackard Siler, which was located near where Lacy's Creek crosses the Piney Grove Church road.

The "big road" to Carraway Creek that Soelle refers to was about two miles west of Plackard Siler's home up Lacy's Creek and was known as Hermon Husband's Road across Randolph and Chatham counties, as it passed by his farm on Sandy Creek, on by the church of the same name, by Staley, Siler City, Gulf, and on to Fayetteville; its other terminus was the Wachovia settlement. It was the first route used by the Moravians in the early 1750s on their way to Fayetteville, before a more direct route was cut a few miles west from the Poolcat Settlement on the old Indian trading path to Fayetteville.