

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## Hominy: An Almost-Lost Art in Food Preparation

Inez Mann\*

First thing we did, when the corn was brought in from the crib, was to "nub" it--that is, pick off the nub or end of the cob, because that's where it started to go bad. Then we (we meant the young people) started shelling it.

When I was little we used the black pot, cast iron. You can't make hominy in anything but an iron or enamel pot. You can't use aluminum or stainless steel because the lye will eat it up. When I made hominy, I started with a plastic five-gallon pail of water. I added one to one-and-a-half gallons of ashes and let it sit for a day, stirring it every once in a while. After about a day, you pour off the water, which is kind of yellowish. Then you boil the corn in the liquid, about all day but at least two hours. That loosens the hulls. After the cooking I'd wash the corn, maybe ten to fifteen times, to get rid of the hulls.

Then you'd put it to soak overnight and cook it again until it was done. There was no seasoning other than some salt. The kernels all swelled up and were much bigger than the ones you get in cans at the store. After it was cooked we put it in enamel pots or glass jars and put it in the smoke-house to keep. We usually ate it for a vegetable at dinner, warming it up in the pan after frying ham or sausage. ...Boy, it's fattening! We would make hominy when the weather was bad and we had to be inside and you'd get the smell of that hominy

*\*(On 1 February 1995 I asked Inez Mann, who lives in the northern part of Baldwin Township, to tell me about how she made hominy. She graciously described making hominy and answered other questions about farming and cooking and, in general, living in Chatham County in the 40s, 50s, earlier and later. What follows is my summary of her narrative, and if I've got it wrong, it's my fault, not hers. --Jane Pyle)*

cooking all through the house. Sometimes my mother made white gravy, what you call milk gravy.

We always made hominy out of white corn. I never tried to make it out of yellow corn, but that might be possible. My father raised "Truckers Favorite" and always saved some out for hominy. He saved seed by keeping the better ears as they were cutting the corn. If there were two good ears on the stalk, he'd take one.

Usually they'd try to bring in the corn before the first frost. They'd cut out the tops and then go back and break off the ears and toss them in the wagon. They'd pile the ears in big piles and then have a corn shucking. The women would cook beef hash, and chicken pies, and all kinds of good food, and about twenty-five to thirty men would come in to shuck the ears. They used shucking picks and piled the ears into a big pile, and if there was time they would load it into the crib. We kids had to carry it to the cribs a lot of the time. Kids helped out with

### Correction

*Wade H. Hadley, Jr., author of the article "St. Mark's Chapel: Migratory and Enduring" in the Chatham Historical Journal, Vol. 7, No. 4, November 1994, would like the following sentences to replace the opening of his article:*

John Haughton (1775-1849) built a small family chapel on his plantation near the town of Gulf in Chatham County, North Carolina, over 147 years ago, a chapel that now rests, restored and well maintained, at Mordecai Square in Raleigh, North Carolina. It remained at its original location for 106 years, then made a sojourn of 26 years in Siler City, North Carolina, and has been at its present location since 1979.

This John Haughton was appointed postmaster at The Gulph (present-day Gulf) November 5, 1836. Lawrence Haughton was appointed postmaster there March 10, 1848. John Haughton is buried in the St. Mark's Cemetery at Gulf, North Carolina.



everything in those days--chopping, milking, chickens. The crib had a cover but was open so the air could get in, and my daddy put a wire around the bottom to keep the rats out. My daddy had a farm below Siler City, but he lost it during the Depression.

After the shucking we might have a dance. Back in those days we had family entertainment. My daddy played the violin, my husband and brother played banjos, two sisters played guitar and another played the piano. When it was season there might be a solid week of corn shuckings at different places. ■

## Silk Culture in Chatham County

Wade H. Hadley, Jr.

Long before the central part of the region that was to become North Carolina was settled, explorers going through this back country returned with glowing reports of its soil and natural resources. Francis Yeardley's report of excursions into this region, dated 8 May 1654, mentions especially the rich mulberry and vine. The final paragraph of his report includes the following sentence: "I am lastly, Sir, a suitor to you, for some silk-worm eggs, and materials for the making of silk, and what other good fruits, or roots, or plants, may be proper for such a country."<sup>1</sup>

When settlers were within the region 78 years later, Captain Burrington, Governor of North Carolina, included the following within a letter of February 1731/2:

*Mulberry Trees that bear the thin leaf proper to feed silk worms grow naturally, this Country is certainly as proper and Convenient to produce silk as any in the world, the reason so little has been made, is that the very*

*time required to look after the silkworms, is the season of Planting and Cultivating Rice, Tobacco, Indian Corn and Pulse.<sup>2</sup>*

Silk culture was mentioned as one of the potential assets of North Carolina early in the colonial period. After it was discovered that silkworms would not eat the leaves of the native red mulberry, the suitable white mulberry was introduced.

State legislatures offered bounties for certain articles, including silk.<sup>3</sup> Many attempts to introduce silk culture were made, but this was never a viable industry, due mainly to its labor-intensive nature.

The prospect of silk culture was popular for periods and many communities tried it, some with limited success for short periods of time. The main purpose of this article is to present evidence that silk culture took place within Chatham County during the 1830s.

In the *Raleigh Register* of 3 November 1831 is an article that reads:

*We learn that the family of J. W. Bynum, Esq. of Chatham, during the last season raised Silk Worms sufficient to produce 600 lbs. of Cocoons, which it is expected from the progress already made in winding them will make twenty thousand skeins of Sewing Silk, equal if not superior to any Italian Silk imported. For the accommodation of such of the industrious housewives of this & the adjoining Counties, as wish to engage in the business of making Silk Mrs. Bynum proposes to lodge a considerable quantity of the Eggs at the Store of the Editors of this paper, to be disposed of at the low rate of twenty-five cents a thousand. She will also deposit a quantity of her beautiful Sewing Silk, to be disposed of at five cents a Skein.*

About seven and a half years later there was an advertisement in the *Fayetteville Observer* of 6 February 1839 that read as follows:

### *Italian Mulberry Trees.*

The subscriber will sell 500,000 cuttings of the Italian Mulberry, at one cent a bud. The stock was raised from the choice selection of Dr. Hentz, late a Professor in the University of North Carolina, and is recommended by the best Silk Culturists.

I would also sell 1000 ACRES OF LAND, on which was raised, five years ago, 600 lbs. Silk, without the benefit of the Italian Mulberry Trees, there being enough of the common sort for a reasonable crop say 500 trees.

The Plantation is calculated for a good Farm, 65 acres being sown in Red Clover, and twenty acres in Herd's Grass, sown on rich low grounds.

J. W. BYNUM

Trades Hill, Chatham, N. C.

January 24th, 1839.

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At the above time, Trades Hill was the name of a rural post office located between the fork of the Haw and New Hope Rivers, about six to seven miles east of Pittsboro.

With these two notices, the J. W. Bynum family of Chatham County is indicated to have been active in silk culture for around eight years or more and on a substantial scale.

The following item concerning the sale of silk-worm eggs by a concern in Pittsboro suggests that a considerable number of families within the trading area of that place may have engaged in silk culture. The *Fayetteville Observer* of 12 June 1839 carried the following item among the advertisements:<sup>4</sup>

**Two Crop White—1,000,000.**

THE Subscriber offers for sale One Million of the two crop White Silk Worm Eggs, laid this spring and selected with great care from the whitest, and finest cocoons. Those who purchase immediately, will have the advantage of raising two crops this season. I shall have my second crop for sale about the 15th or 20th of July next. Price \$1 per thousand.

H. A. LONDON.

Pittsborough, May 31, 1839.

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A present-day reminder of attempts to establish a silk industry in Chatham County is a community named Silk Hope. This name was in use prior to 1854. The *North Carolina Standard*, Raleigh, of

*In October 1828, The Rt. Rev. Joseph B. Cheshire, Bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, visited St. Mark's Chapel, Gulf. He reported in his journal, "Administered the Holy Communion, made an address, took part in meeting of old members of this church after the service."*

*In this photograph are (from left) Arthur London, William Guthrie Frasier, the Rt. Rev. Joseph B. Cheshire, ?, Mattie Calvert(?), ?, James Cordon, ?, and ?.*

*(Fred London, Raleigh, shared this photograph; Dr. Lawrence London, Chapel Hill, contributed the entry from Bishop Cheshire's journal. The Journal solicits readers to identify other persons in the photograph.)*

7 June 1854 listed Silk Hope as a place that the Chatham

County Sheriff would visit to collect taxes that year. This community is in southwestern Hadley Township, about eleven miles from Pittsboro.

NOTES

1. Lefler, Hugh Talmage, *North Carolina History as Told by Contemporaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 14, quoting from *Narratives of Early Carolina, 1650-1708* (edited by A. S. Salley), p. 23-29.
2. *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, Vol. III, William L. Saunders, ed. (Raleigh: P.M. Hale, 1886), p. 338.
3. Lefler, Hugh T. and William S. Powell, *Colonial North Carolina - A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 155.
4. In 1836 Henry Adolphus London moved to Pittsborough, where he was engaged in the mercantile business.

*A Reminiscence of John London*

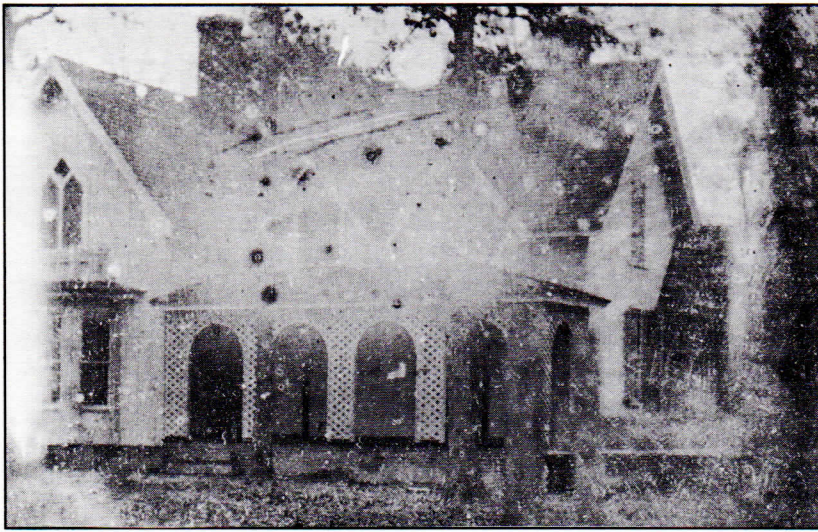
Fred Nooe\*

John London and I go back a long way--to childhood--when we went to picnics and parties together. As you know he had strong likes and dislikes. One time we went on a picnic up on Belmont. I didn't have much to carry so Mother cooked some link sausages; John ate every one. As to snapbeans, he wouldn't touch the damn things.

He was invited to my birthday party where one of the guests was a girl the boys didn't like. John left his gift and hid until the party was over so "Miss Lizzie" [his mother, Elizabeth Foushee London] wouldn't know he had not stayed.







A recent acquisition of the Chatham Historical Museum is this photograph of Rock Rest, home of Edward Jones, 1762-1841, located 8 miles northwest of Pittsboro. According to *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County*, Rock Rest was destroyed in a fire about 1923.

The photograph is identified on the back as a reproduction from a glass daguerrotype owned by Simmons Jones of Charlotte. The photograph was generously donated to the Chatham County Historical Association by Dr. Lawrence London, Chapel Hill, who was born and reared in Pittsboro.

John was a grade ahead of me in school. He and his brother Lonnie attended public school until 8th or 9th grade when they went to Episcopal High. We entered the U.N.C. in the same class.

Both of us returned to Pittsboro, he to supervise the mill at Bynum, I to work at Pilkington's Drug Store. At this time in our lives we courted the new schoolteachers who came to Pittsboro. Each of us married one of the teachers. Our future wives--Helen Renfrow and Jane Highsmith--roomed together at Camelia Jerome's. Jane lived in Gastonia and Helen in Matthews. I'd often drop John off and pick him back up. One rainy night between Albemarle and Sanford we ran down an embankment. Looking around, we found wood someone was cutting. We put it under the car, pushed the car to the road, and drove on to Pittsboro. He married in '36, I in '37 with John as one of my ushers.

The summer before those final courtships, four of us went to the World's Fair in Chicago: with me were John, his brother Fred, and C. C. Hamlet. I had a new Chevrolet. As we rode along, ads for CheerWine were frequent. Imagine our disappointment on buying some to find water colored with cherry flavoring. We stayed a week, with each one's total expense less than \$100. On this trip John developed another "like"--cantaloupe.

Dr. "Pilk" used to say that John was a tightwad and would do well financially. Which brings up another "like"--to pay bills as they were presented. And another--lamb. We'd buy one and halve it.

*\*Fred Nooe dictated this reminiscence soon after John London's death in 1988. John's "likes" included ever-widening history: of his family, his church, Pittsboro, Chatham County, and beyond. He served as treasurer of the Chatham County Historical Association.*

*Fond memories of Fred Nooe include his pasturing his cow near his house, two blocks from the county courthouse, until his death in 1990.*

On Saturday nights we had a poker game until all the group died except John and me. He and I continued to visit each other frequently. On those visits we reminisced about what had happened and was happening in Pittsboro. Several times these trips into the past brought out things best not printed. When he was a boy he pumped the organ for "Miss Nellie" (Mrs. Victor Johnson) to play. This love of his church never died.

He called me "Nooe" and I called him "Johnny." One thing I'd like to say about Johnny--he was a true friend, an honest man, and set in his ways. I could go on and on--for 75 years covers more than the three score and ten promised man. A lot of water has gone under the bridge, and some over. ■

## *Growing Up in Chatham County*

When we were boys growing up in Pittsboro, we used to collect "Co-Cola" bottle caps and take them up to the balcony of the courthouse. The game was to skim the caps out and see if you could get them to stay in the brim of the Confederate soldier's hat. I suppose a good rain would wash them out.

As told by Lawrence London

The **Chatham Historical Journal** is an occasional publication of the Chatham County Historical Association. Its purpose is to disseminate items of historical interest about Chatham County. To be considered for publication, articles or photographs should be previously unpublished, of reasonable length, and include detailed sources of information.

Back issues, beginning in 1988, are available while they last. Correspondence should be addressed to the Secretary, CCHA, Box 913, Pittsboro, N.C. 27312.