

Black Chathamites

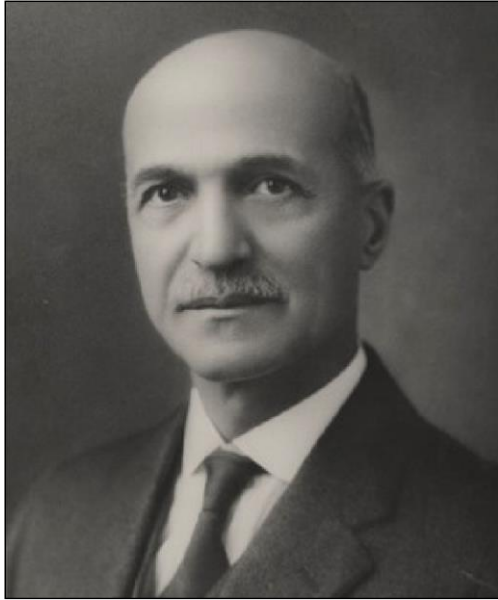
Making a Difference

Brief biographical sketches of a number of prominent black Chathamites were compiled by Delphine Womack and Joyce Cotten for a display at the 2017 Horton School Reunion. The information for the sketches comes from a variety of sources: newspapers, the Horton Yearbook, Internet sources, Chatham County Historical Association records, funeral programs, and books. All of the individuals described were either born in Chatham, received their education in the county, or lived later in life in Chatham.

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Simon Green Atkins

b. 1863 - d. 1934



Simon Green Atkins, educator and founder of Winston-Salem Teachers' College, was born in Haywood, Chatham County. His parents were Allen and Eliza Atkins, farmers.

Atkins received his early schooling in Haywood where he was an astute student and progressed to teaching in the town school before he enrolled in St. Augustine's Normal Collegiate Institute, now St. Augustine's College, in 1880. After graduating from college, he took a teaching position in Chatham County. His aptitude was recognized, and he was employed by Livingstone College in Salisbury in the fall of 1884. There Atkins served as head of the grammar school department for six years and during the last two years, acted as the treasurer of the college. While associated with Livingstone College, Atkins spent his summers conducting institutes for black teachers in various North Carolina counties.

In 1890, he accepted a teaching position in Winston as principal of the public school for blacks. Soon after arriving in Winston, he initiated a project to develop Columbian Heights, a neglected section of town, in order to provide blacks with better housing conditions and ownership of their homes. In 1895, he resigned from his position with the public school to work full time with a school he established named Slater Normal and Industrial School. The school received a legislative charter in 1897. The school grew rapidly and expanded under Atkins's leadership, until the state bought the property in 1905 and took full control. It became a high school and in 1925 the North Carolina General Assembly rechartered the school as the Winston-Salem Teachers' College, extending its curriculum to four years of college work designated its function to the training of teachers, supervisors, and principals for the black elementary schools of the state. Atkins continued as president of the college until retiring at the end of the spring term in 1934, because of poor health.

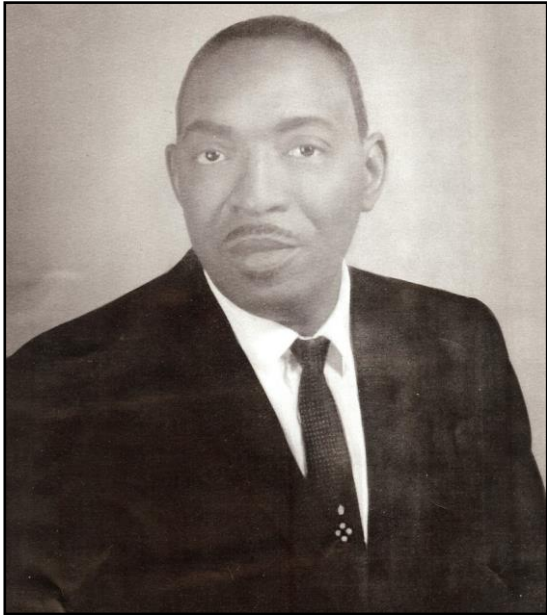
Atkins was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church for fifty years. During twenty of these, he served as the church's secretary. He represented the church at three successive ecumenical conferences: 1901 in London, 1911 in Toronto, and 1921 in London.

Atkins was one of the founders of the North Carolina Negro Teachers' Association, organized in 1881. He served this organization for several terms as secretary and as president (ending in 1927).

Atkins was married in 1889 to Oleona Pegram of New Bern, North Carolina, and they had nine children, one of whom, Francis L. Atkins, succeeded his father as President of Winston-Salem Teachers College in 1934.

Louis Edgar Bland

b. 23 Oct 1920 – d. 14 Nov 1975



Louis Edgar Bland, son of Jake and Sophia Taylor Bland, was born October 23, 1920.

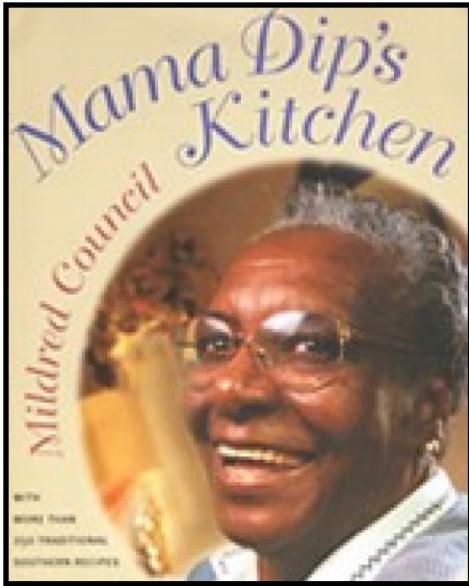
Mr. Bland worked for many years at the Pittsboro Agricultural Building. Later he was employed at the Chatham County Sheriff's Department, and was the first black to join the Sheriff's Department. He remained in that position until his health declined.

He was well-known in the Pittsboro area at that time for being on the team of the Pittsboro Atomic Baseball Team and was well recognized for his outstanding baseball abilities.

Mildred Edna Cotton Council

b. 1929 – d. 2018

“Mama Dip”



Mildred Edna Cotton Council (aka Mama Dip) was born and grew up on a farm in northern Chatham County. Her parents were Ed and Effie Edwards Cotton. According to Mildred, her father started teaching her how to cook at age 7. During her school years, she was one of the students selected to work in the new lunchroom by a staff member. That is when her dream of one day owning her own business began.

Following graduation from Horton High School in 1948, she moved to Chapel Hill where she began to hone her cooking skills. She was employed by such entities as Carolina Coffee Shop, Kappa Sigma fraternity and St.

Andrews Hall. In 1957, she worked with her mother-in-law in a tiny take-out restaurant where she began learning business skills.

On a Sunday in November 1976, Mama Dip opened her own restaurant with \$64--\$40 dollars went toward food and \$24 was used to make change. The morning's take was used to fund the lunch meal and lunch to fund the dinner. At the end of the day Mama Dip took home \$135, and the rest is history.

Mama Dip remembers the menu that was prepared at Horton School served to the administrative staff—stew beef, spinach, potatoes, lemon pie, and ice tea. Those items are always on the menu at Mama Dip's restaurant today.

Mildred was the youngest of seven, and was dubbed "Dip" by her siblings because she was so tall and had such long arms that she could reach way down in the rain barrel to scoop up a big dipper full of water when the level was low. She first learned to cook by using the "dump cooking" method. Dump cooking means no recipes, just measure by eye, feel, taste, and testing.

Mama Dip has authored two books, which share not only recipes, but also great stories about her life in food. She celebrates the importance of family and community based around cuisine--particularly Southern cooking. She has been featured on numerous television programs, and appeared on an episode of *Rachael Ray*. Mama Dip was featured on WRAL, Raleigh, as part of the "Tar Heel Traveling" series. She was 85 at the time of the interview in 2014, and it is still available at the following link: <http://www.wral.com/lifestyles/travel/video/13887211/>

"Sharing my cooking with the community reminds me of bringing my dolls together so many years ago for some old-fashioned mud pies. Spreading my love and happiness like pumpkin seeds all around." -- Mama Dip.

Margie Elizabeth Ellison

b. 28 Dec 1949 –d. Feb 2009



Margie Horton Ellison was a tireless Chatham County activist tackling minority voting rights, youth enrichment and nuclear plant safety.

A retired social worker and Chatham County native, Ellison served as a member of the steering committee of the Chatham Coalition. A grassroots citizens PAC that organized to advocate for better planning in the wake of Chatham's runaway growth. For decades, she tackled each challenge with the same belief: that those who empower themselves can change the world.

Born in 1949, Ellison grew up in Pittsboro, attending segregated schools and splitting time between her parents' house and that of her grandparents, who cared for her and her sister while her parents worked. Her father was employed as a chauffeur and cook for a local banker and her mother worked in a poultry plant. "They worked hard for their children to have a better life, and education was the key," Ellison says of her parents. "They wanted us to be the first generation to actually go to college."

Ellison fulfilled their dream, graduating from N.C. Central University, where she was thrust into the Civil Rights movement at its heyday.

"During that time, there were expectations not only from your family, but from your school and your community, to not only make something of yourself, but also to make a contribution," Ellison says. "You had to give something back because so many people had done so much to help you."

After college, Ellison took a job in New Jersey helping adults complete their high-school equivalency education and set career goals. Moving back to her hometown in 1982 with her husband and young son in tow, Ellison spent 23 years in social work in foster care for the Chatham County Child Protective Services. Ellison also found there was no real organizational effort to register minority voter and she began voter education and registration drives. "I just starting working and began to understand a lot of work needs to be done to move African Americans into getting elected, into having a voice in government. In addition to her work on campaigns, Ellison was involved in youth and public education issues. She launched the nonprofit Growing Healthy Communities, which exposes minority children to role models using projects such as leadership summits and community gardens.

And in yet another arena of activism, Ellison became the organizing director for the N.C. Waste Awareness Reduction Network, which advocated for sustainable energy and was a vigilant watchdog of safety at Progress Energy's Shearon Harris nuclear plant.

Lewis Freeman

b. circa 1775 – d. 1845

(a free man of color)



Lewis Freeman was a very successful early free black settler in Pittsboro, North Carolina. Lewis was able to purchase at least 16 lots in town and 20 acres in surrounding Chatham County. He left a will he wrote in January 1845 (and recorded in August of that same year). To his wife, Creecy, Lewis left their home and various lots in Pittsboro as well as 20 acres in surrounding Chatham County. His original house, located on Main Street in Pittsboro, was a typical one-room

structure. Very few African Americans are able to identify the home their ancestor occupied before the Civil War. Although Lewis's home has been modified over the years, enough of it has remained to earn a spot on the [National Register of Historic Places in North Carolina](#).

Lewis accumulated an impressive real estate portfolio. Less clear is the source of Lewis's wealth. The early census records list him as being employed in agriculture, but he may very well have been more than a farmer.

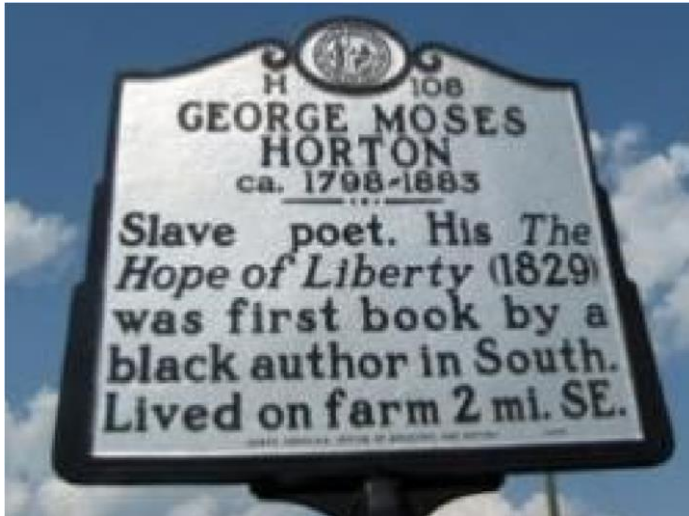
Lewis Freeman was himself a slave owner of two slaves that lived in his household, both under the age of 14. Lewis also purchased his first wife, Maria, from one man and purchased his son Waller after he was born. That way, he was able to live with his slave wife and child as a family. After Maria died, he sold his son to a man who took Waller to New York City in order to free him. Lewis remained in the south and later married a woman named Creecy.

"Lewis Freeman ingeniously invented a way to free his enslaved son, never to see him again."

The Lewis Freeman house, located at 159 W. Salisbury St, Pittsboro, 27312, is now the offices of Hobbs Architects, PA.

George Moses Horton

b. circa 1798 - d. 1883



Declared the historic poet laureate of Chatham County, Horton was born a slave on William Horton's tobacco plantation in 1798. He taught himself to read, though it was forbidden for slaves, and composed and performed poetry about the rural landscape, Civil War politics, and his harsh experiences under slavery. Horton holds the distinction of being the first African American to publish a book, and the only to publish while living in slavery. His poetry explores faith, love, and slavery while celebrating the rural beauty of

Chatham County, home of the plantation on which Horton spent much of his life.

Working at a farmer's market in nearby Chapel Hill on weekends, he wrote verses and sold them individually, the most popular of which were love poems swept up by college students from the University of North Carolina seeking the perfect gift for their sweethearts. He gained the attention of the university's president, Joseph Caldwell, and was patronized by Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, the wife of a professor of modern languages, who helped publish his work in the local newspaper.

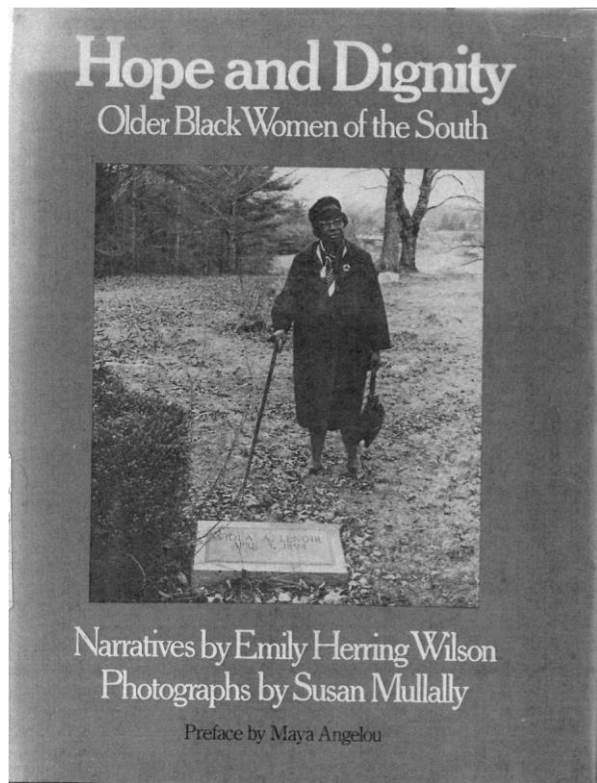
His first book, *The Hope of Liberty*, was published in 1829 with the help of area residents. He hoped that selling his book would earn him enough money to purchase his freedom. Unfortunately, his attempts were denied on every occasion, despite the support of the governor of North Carolina. In 1865, he walked north with Union soldiers to freedom.

To commemorate his life and work, the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, as part of its Historical Marker Program, placed a marker for Horton at the intersection of U.S. 15-501 and S.R. 1700, between Chapel Hill and Pittsboro, near the plantation on which he lived.

The Chatham County middle school is named for the poet and is committed to a broad literary arts curriculum. In 2000, the Horton Jubilee celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth with readings and writing workshops, storytelling performances, and sidewalk artists. A dedicated group of students, teachers, and other volunteers constructed the Path to Freedom on school grounds, a mosaic made up of twelve stepping stones, each depicting an image from Horton's poem "On Summer."

Gatha Horton Lassiter

b. 1910 – d. 1988



Gatha Horton Lassiter (1910-1988) was born in Chatham County, NC, to Alford and Minnie Horton. She married Charlie Royster in 1931 and with him had two children. Gatha Horton Lassiter moved to Chapel Hill as an adult where she did practical nursing, was active in the civil rights movement, and volunteered extensively with several churches.

In the University community, she was better known than many professors. Mrs. Lassiter consistently attended public meetings bringing attention to the poor and under-privileged.

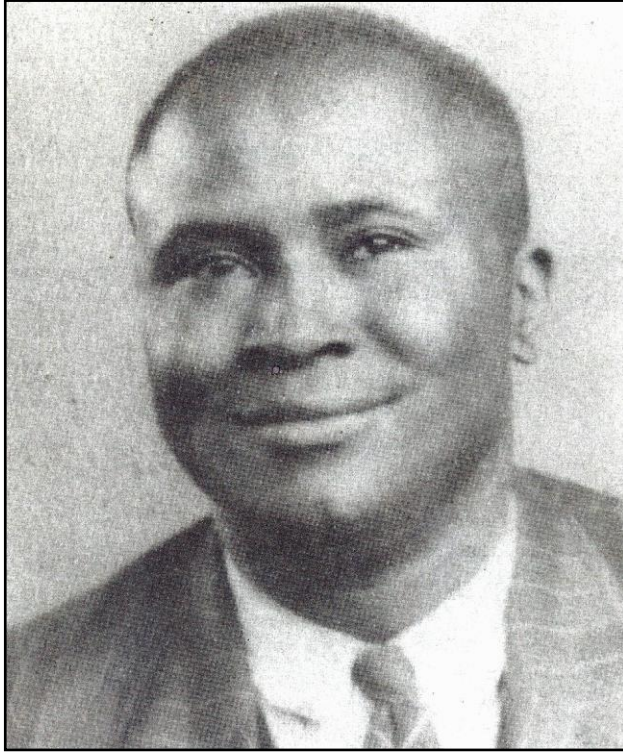
Lassiter wrote an essay entitled *Ivory Towers and No Sidewalks*, published in *Hope and Dignity, Older Black Women of the South*. Until the sixties, when desegregation came to Chapel Hill, neighborhood schools for black children did not have sidewalks. She became involved in the needs of school children and families who lived in low-rent housing and the elderly.

“There are still large numbers of people who need an advocate and Gatha Lassiter spoke for the neediest.”

“My house was a meeting house for the people.”

Benjamin Joseph Lee

b. 12 Nov 1901 - d. 19 May 1944



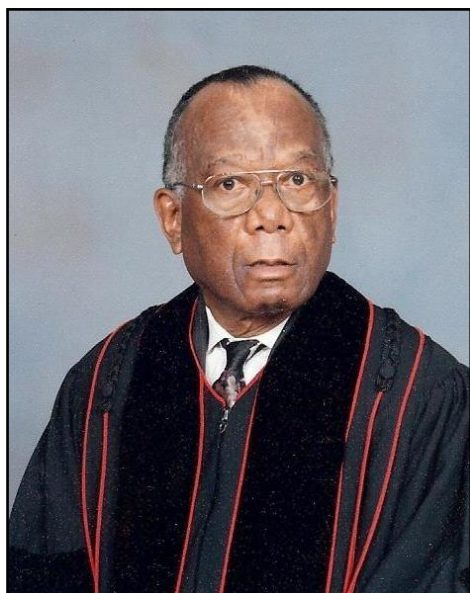
As a teacher at the Horton Colored School prior to 1934, Benjamin Lee advocated for a high school for black students and in 1934, the high school became a reality. It was named Horton Consolidated School (after the poet George Moses Horton) and Benjamin Lee was the first principal. He served as principal until his death in 1944.

Benjamin Lee, the son of Lizzie Thompson Lee and William Lee was born in Chatham County in 1901. His educational training began in the Chatham County school system and continued at Berry O'Kelly School in Raleigh in order to prepare for college where he earned a teaching degree at Livingston College in Salisbury, North Carolina.

His first job as a teacher was in a one-room school setting. In 1934, several small one-room schools in the Pittsboro area were consolidated, and Horton High School was born. The first high school graduation was in 1935 and Lee's dream became a reality for black students.

Dr. Mansel Philip McCleave

b. 7 Aug 1921 — d. 25 Nov 2010



During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, weary Black Americans became fed up with mistreatment and sub-par living standards. Demanding equal rights and justice, the student sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, became a vital part of blacks making strides to become equal.

In his later years, Dr. McCleave wrote the book, *Hunger Pains in Our Heads*, which described the pressures leading up to that fateful day, the people involved in the event, and the lasting impact after that day. Rev. Mansel Philip McCleave was in the midst of these events as he was a Horticulture and Agriculture instructor at North Carolina A&T College, where the students attended school. He describes in great detail the days leading up to the “Woolworth Student Sit-In Movement,” describing the hopes, fears, and pressures the people felt at that time.

Rev. McCleave attempted to analyze the measures that led to North Carolina being the site of such a stand, the people who took the stand, the history behind the stand, and the results of the stand.

Dr. McCleave was born in Rock Hill, SC August 2, 1921, but moved to the Siler City area when he was a toddler. Both parents were teachers and his father was also a minister. His father later became principal of Goldston Elementary School. After retirement, Dr. McCleave returned to the Siler City area, where he lived until his death November 25, 2010.

Dr. McCleave received a BS Degree, A&T College; Master of Science, A&T; and a Doctorate of Divinity from Friendship College. He spent 33 years as an instructor of Plant Science at NC A&T. Upon his retirement, he moved to Liberty where he pastored a church in Siler City for several years and is well known for his work with the Deep River Missionary Baptist Association which oversees the operation of approximately 40 churches.

Walter Alston McLaughlin, Sr.

b. 21 Oct 1910 - d. 31 Jul 1971



Walter Alston McLaughlin, Sr., was born October 21, 1910 in Charlotte, and was educated in the public schools of Charlotte and St. Augustine College. Mr. McLaughlin taught mathematics at the Goldston Colored School and later became principal before being drafted to serve in the U. S. Army. He was commissioned to First Lieutenant, serving in the European Theater of Operations in World War II.

After completing his military duty, he returned to Goldston with his wife, Alice. During those years in the 40's, 50's and beyond, he bonded with the community and served the Goldston Community as principal for over 30 years. He loved his students, respected their families and believed there were greater opportunities for them. He pushed students to excel

and supported their efforts when possible. He had an excellent relationship with the families. In the 60's, Mr. McLaughlin later served the Chatham County School System as Supervisor of Secondary Education.

His long-term commitment to education and humanitarian endeavors had a lasting effect on the Goldston community. The W. A. McLaughlin Commercial Center was built in his honor and his legacy continues to live on.

Margaret Bryant Pollard

b. 3 May 1932 - d. 16 Sep 2009



Mrs. Pollard was born May 3rd, 1932—the 9th of 11 children to Maude Lee and Robert Gade Bryant. The granddaughter of a slave, her life was one of joy and success. Margaret Bryant Pollard attributed her success to the lessons she learned from her parents and siblings. They taught her how to overcome life’s challenges with determination and a positive attitude. Her parents harvested cotton, sold a pig or two when bills came due, and even cut timber to cover the children’s tuition.

Margaret graduated from Horton High School as the class valedictorian. She went on to graduate from North Carolina College at Durham (North Carolina Central University) with a Bachelor’s degree in Biology and a Master’s degree in Public Health. She was fortunate to be able to teach in the high school she attended. After that valuable

experience, she left North Carolina to work in various capacities before returning to North Carolina to work as a health educator in Greensboro.

Margaret returned to Chatham County to work at the Dental Division of the North Carolina State Health Department. Her final career venture was to serve as an adjunct professor of public health at the University of North Carolina, School of Public Health.

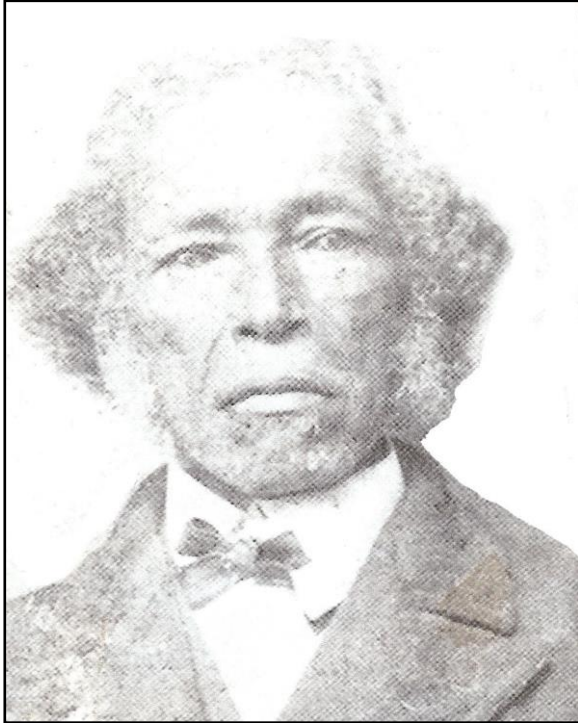
Ms. Pollard was appointed to an open County Commissioner seat in 1994. Upon completing that term, she ran and won two more elections serving until 2004. She was known for her exhaustive research and data driven decision making style; her strong commitment to justice and community uplift; and her leadership in managed growth, environmental protection, and sustainable economic development.

Chatham County is a more “beloved community” thanks to the life and work of Margaret Bryant Pollard. Margaret received many awards and recognitions for her community work.

*Partial excerpts of an article written by her daughter, Miriam Pollard Hanner.

Richard R. Ramsey, Sr.

b. 5 Feb 1835 - d. 8 Sep 1906



Richard R. Ramsey was born on February 5, 1835. There are no known records of his parents, however, he was married to Leah Ramsey. He is known to have been in the embalming business, a mail carrier (Pony Express), and a Justice of the Peace. He operated out of home and served blacks and whites. He died on September 8, 1906.

Detailed information on Mr. Ramsey is not available but based on the documentation that is obtainable, Mr. Ramsey would have been able to read and write, and held prominent positions following the Civil War.

J. R. Richardson

b. 18 Jan 1882 - d. 10 Dec 1961



J. R. Richardson was born January 18, 1881 and was the son of John Anderson and Mary Jane Richardson. He lived an enriching and inspiring life about three and a half miles from Pittsboro.

Richardson received an education from A & T College in Greensboro. For 44 years, he instructed students at various schools throughout the county. He conducted and taught a local band in Chatham County and was a self-taught musician, capable of playing all the instruments in the band. He also taught vocal music.

With hands that were never idle, he made chairs, ax-handles, baskets of all kinds, and straw brooms. Tourists from across the state would stop by his home to admire his vegetable and flower gardens.

A member of St. Matthews Church, he was well known for his thorough knowledge of the Bible.

Jeanette French Richardson

4 Jan 1892 - 19 Dec 1993



Jeanette French Richardson was born January 4, 1892, in Chatham County. She was the daughter of John and Emmeline Degraffeneridit French. She started school around the age of five, completed elementary school, high school, and summer school by the time she was 18 years old.

She went on to attend A&T College, Bennett College and NC Central and taught in the Chatham County School System for 36 years, retiring in 1946. But, her contribution to society was not over, as she soon began another career.

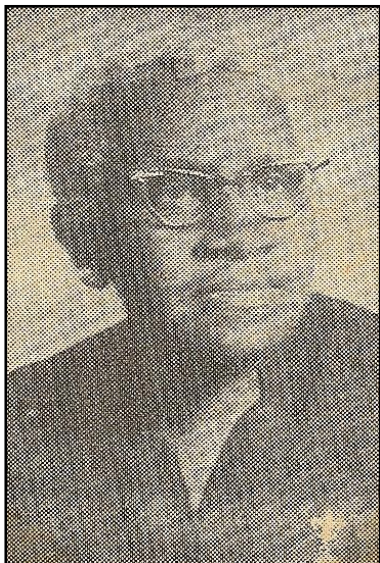
Mrs. Richardson began a second career in March 1949 as a Nurse's Assistant at Mathiesen's Clinic in Pittsboro. She later became a Licensed Practical Nurse and worked in that capacity until 1972. Jeanette is remembered by many people in the Pittsboro area for her work as the "baby nurse" at the clinic in Pittsboro.

Jeanette grew up in Mitchell Chapel AME Zion Church and later joined St. Matthews Church where she held many offices.

"Aunt Jennie" as she was affectionately called, was active in civic, social and community activities. She passed away at the wonderful age of one hundred and one, having touched many lives in and around Chatham County by her teaching and her work as a nurse.

Roxie A. Small

b. 29 Sep 1898 - d. 6 Mar 1965



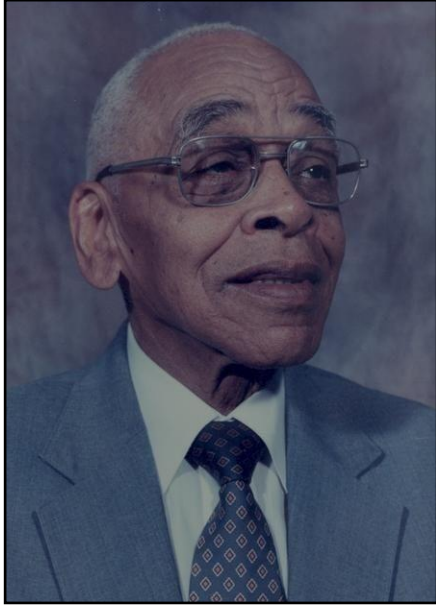
Daughter of a former slave, Mrs. Small was born in Chatham County in 1898. She worked vigorously promoting the agricultural extension programs in Chatham County, pastored Belmont and Blacknall AME Zion churches during the 1960's. She served as president of the Horton High School PTA for 16 years. She served as President of the Chatham County Agricultural & Industrial Fair Association in the 1950's where she was described as an "indefatigable worker with the Farm and Home Organization."

A prominent citizen and church woman and a longtime native of Pittsboro, she ran a rest home for the aged in Pittsboro and was elected "Mother of the Year" in June, 1960 by the Chatham Community branch of the NAACP.

Mrs. Small ran for the Chatham County Board of Education (year unknown). She was the first black to run for that position in Chatham County.

Jessie Walker Rodgers

b. 18 Dec 1916 - d. 1 Jan 2009



Mr. Jessie Walker Rodgers was born in Chatham County on December 18, 1916, the son of Willie D. and Fannie Degraffenreidt Rodgers. He was employed by Griffin Funeral Service in Pittsboro for 65 years.

Mr. Rodgers was an NC licensed funeral director since September, 1958. When the Griffin Funeral Home built a new facility, the reception area was named in his memory by the company. A plaque hangs in the reception hall and reads, "It is with a deep debt of gratitude and honor that we choose to remember Mr. Jessie for his lifetime contributions to generations of Chatham County citizens."

Mr. Jessie was an active member of Mitchell Chapel AME Zion Church, and the Chatham County Ushers Association; he had served as a church usher from age 9 until his death. Mr. Jessie served his church and community for 92 years.

Race was not an issue with this kind and gentle man, and he touched many lives at a time when families needed a kind word.

Lillie Freeman Rodgers

b. 30 Dec 1911 - d. 12 Apr 1982



Ms. Rodgers was born December 30, 1911, the daughter of William B Freeman and Lillie Freeman. She graduated from Kittrell College and Elizabeth City State Teachers College with Honors. Ms. Rodgers received a B. S. Degree from Shaw University, and did graduate work in mentally retarded studies at North Carolina A & T State University.

Ms. Rodgers taught 38 years in the Chatham County School System and provided tutorial services in the home.

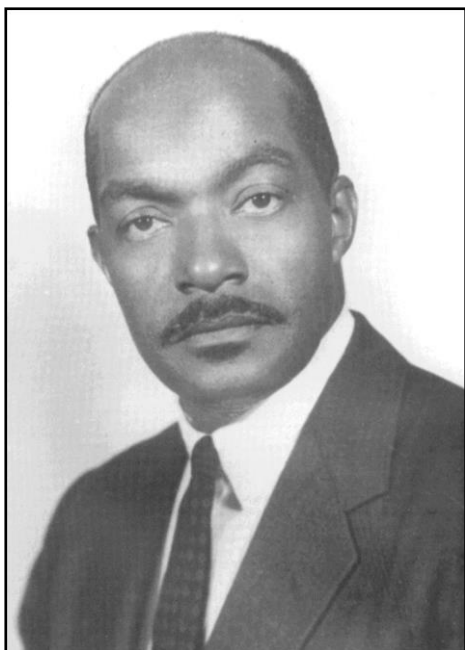
She was affiliated with Mitchell Chapel AMEZ Church and participated in the following activities of the church: Class Leader; Missionary/ Directress of Children's Department; Usher Board; Recreation Department; Publicity Committee; Senior Choir; Director of Youth Choir; and Sunday School Teacher.

Many honors were bestowed Ms. Rogers during her lifetime: Governor's Volunteer Award; Mother of the Year at NC A & T; Female Citizen of the Year for Eastern Star; and Ms. NC Senior Citizen's Foundation.

Community and public service included Alston Chapel Recreation Center; First Literacy Program for Black Adults in Chatham County; Developed private library at Rodger's Grill with the assistance of the Chatham County Bookmobile; Chatham County Fair Association; and one of the Founders of Day Care Centers at Mt. Sinai and Mitchell Chapel AMEZ churches.

Isaiah Eugene Taylor, Sr.

17 Apr 1911—3 Sep 1983



Born in 1911 to Inda Taylor from Chatham County, he lived with his grandfather, an ex-slave, until his death in 1921. His grandfather instilled in Isaiah a love for learning. Following his grandfather's death, he lived with an aunt, Martha Taylor. As a youngster, he worked for Arthur London where he got his first chance to drive a car at the age of 12.

During that time, blacks could only receive a seventh grade education in Pittsboro. Mr. Taylor moved to Raleigh to live with family to attend school and work. He went on to graduate from Shaw University at the age of 26. He returned to Pittsboro to teach at Horton Consolidated School under the leadership of Principal Benjamin Lee.

He left Horton for several years to fill in a vacancy at J. S. Waters but upon Lee's death in 1944, Mr. Taylor was named principal at Horton. During his tenure at Horton High School, he saw the campus evolve from a one-building

facility to a campus of three buildings. A gym bearing his name and an agriculture building were constructed.

Isaiah was a dedicated organizer and worked hard to further the educational opportunities of the black students. One of his highlights of each week was a Thursday assembly program with students being exposed to the prominent and not so prominent, in an effort to broaden their horizon and to encourage them to become productive citizens. The school population exceeded 1,300 students prior to integration. After integration, during the school year of 1969-1970, Horton became a middle school. Mr. Taylor played an integral part in the transition during the integration of the black and white schools.

Isaiah dedicated 31 years to the education of students in eastern Chatham County. Upon his retirement, Horton students participated in a three-day celebration of his leadership. Many students returned to the Horton Campus to celebrate his dedicated service to the black community.

Mr. Taylor was also dedicated to his church where he served in numerous capacities at Mt. Sinai AME Church. He was instrumental in organizing recreational outings for the children of the church family. Mr. Taylor also remained active in the community where he served on the Pittsboro Town Board for a number of years.