

## ROCKINGHAM COUNTY 119 YEARS AGO

By ALEXANDER SNEED in the WILMINGTON STAR,

Dear Messrs. Editors:

In compliance with your request of the 30th of March, 1810, I beg leave to submit the following description of the county of Rockingham:

Rockingham county is bounded on the North by the State of Virginia; on the East by Caswell county; on the south by Guilford county (of which formerly it was a part); on the West by Stokes county, and is about 30 miles in length from east to west, and between 10 and 20 miles in breadth from north to south; and contains agreeable to the late census 10,278. Inhabitants, which give an increase in the last 10 years of 2,001.

The country is rather broken than level, though not mountaineous, with a salubrious air, which renders it as healthy, perhaps, as any part of North Carolina—the atmosphere, however, is subject to sudden violent transitions from heat to cold, and from cold to heat, so common in the middle and southern states, owing chiefly to the shifting of the wind from one point to another, which are very frequent during autumn and the winter months.

The lands on the Dan and Haw rivers, are mostly of a dark rich mould, mixed with sand and are well adapted to the culture of Indian corn, etc, and are the most valuable of any in the county; which upon an average may be estimated at about \$10 per acre about the year 1750. Robert Jones, (the great attorney), and Daniel Weldon, both of this state, men of great speculative genius, entered and surveyed all the lands on this river from the lower Saura Town to the upper, including the latter, in Stokes county, a distance of 40 miles taking the meanders of the river, which land they sold from about 17 to 25 dollars per hundred acres, some of which could not now be got for a less sum per acre. The lands next in quality to these,

are the bottom and high lands on the Haw river, the Mayo and the Smiths rivers, and some of the large creeks (to wit) Troublesome, Hogans creek, Wolf Island, Jacobs creek, Beaver Island, and some others; on which these are a variety of soil, well adapted to the culture of tobacco, Indian corn, wheat, rye, oats, the Irish and sweet potato, and most of the vegetable productions, necessary for the use of man, and which are common in the western part of the state; and may be estimated at about \$5 per acre. The next and third quality of land, situate on the small streams and rivulets, is mostly of a light soil, mixed with stone and gravel, and much better adapted to the culture of cotton and some vegetable productions, than either of the above mentioned qualities; and may be worth about \$2.50 per acre. The fourth and last quality of land is generally broken, poor, and stoney, situated on the dividing ridges between the different water courses, the greater part of which is scarcely fit for cultivation, and formerly contributed much to the benefit and convenience of the citizens, as an outlet for their live stock, but of late years, as population increased, the range has been nearly eaten out; and is not at present, worth more than from 50 to 100 cents per acre.

The timber, consists of a variety of the oak, some of which are found here in the greatest perfection, black walnut, cherry, hickory, chestnut, poplar, (which make excellent shingles), ash, beach, elm, birch, sycamore, mulberry, maple, sweet gum, locust (which make excellent gardentposts) and some pine of an inferior quality; together with a variety of under growth common in the western part of the state. Springs of excellent water abound in almost every part of the county, particularly on the head waters of the different streams that fall into the above mentioned rivers--and small and large streams, suitable for mill seats, and other purposes, are interspersed with profusion throughout the county.

This county was first settled in and about the year 1750 by hunters, the proper pioneers of all new countries as the county increased in permanent

settlers, those hunters, like the ball of empire, took their western course, and soon gave way to a description of persons more enterprising and industrious, from which the present inhabitants have mainly descended. There are no remarkable occurrences in the history of this county, prior to , or during the Revolutionary war, worthy of notice, except the battle at Guilford Court House, which more properly belongs to a description of that county; ~~it~~ may not, however, be improper here to remark, that the citizens generally were zealous in the cause of liberty, and much attached to the principles of the Revolution; ~~many~~ of whom volunteered their service and marched against the common enemy, when occasion required.

The Dan, which is the principal river ~~in~~ in the county, is a gentle stream, confined by banks so high as to prevent its often overflowing, it is about 100 yards wide generally, and navigable by batteaux to near the mountains in Stokes County. The river, which was formerly well stored with fish of various kinds, meanders with many windings through the county in a northeasterly direction until it intersects the Virginia line a little below the mouth of Cascade creek. The Mayo and Smiths rivers, are shallow and rapid streams, and empty themselves into the Dan from the northwest, by mouths of 60 or 70 yards wide. On both of these rivers, near mouths, and on the main road leading from Salisbury and Salem, to Petersburg in Virginia are mill seats equal perhaps, to any in the state, and form the greatest cataracts in the county, which are of a gentle recent at least a mile in length—nay it is thought by some, that mills on the most improved plan, and on a large scale, might be erected here with the greatest ease, and much to the advantage of the citizens generally. The Haw river and Troublesome creek, are deep and muddy streams, and narrow,—the bottom lands on these waters, are said to be much the best for meadow of any in the county, but it is believed, there are others that would answer the purpose very well. The only merchant mills in the county are erected on these waters; two of which are the

property of James Patrick, Esq. One is erected on a small branch of Haw river, the other, which is more worthy of notice, stands on the site of the old iron works on Troublesome creek, a never failing stream; and on the main road leading from Salisbury to Danville in Virginia there being only one more in the county, which is owned by Peter Bysor at the High Rock ford on Haw river. In justice to the enterprising spirit of these two gentlemen, it may not be amiss here to remark, that flour of the first quality is manufactured here, which find a ready market at Petersburg and Fayetteville. The county is intersected in every direction with convenient roads, and some wooden bridges are thrown across Haw river and Troublesome creek of tolerable workmanship.

There are some iron mines, particularly in the neighborhood of the Troublesome old iron works, but they are discussed at present. The works (which were erected about the year 1770, and perhaps the first in the state) having gone to ruin. There is likewise, specimens of the load stone found near the confluence of the Dan and Smith rivers, which appear to possess in an eminent degree, all the virtues of the real magnet; and it is believed, that there are various other kinds of ore hid in the bowels of the earth, there being in different parts of the county, several spare water springs impregnated with different kinds of metal; those near Lenox Castle, on the waters of Hogans creek, are the greatest repute, and were formerly the resort of the wealthy citizens from the eastern part of the state.

Tobacco, cotton, beef, pork, flour, flax seed, wheat, bees wax, and some hemp form the staple commodities of this county, the principal of which is tobacco, the most of which are carried to Petersburg and Richmond in Virginia, except wheat and flax seed, which articles will better bear the carriage to Fayetteville, where they meet with a ready market in exchange for sale, much to the profit, and domestic convenience of the citizens generally. The quantity of produce thus exported, is indeed very considerable, but there is no data by which an estimate of its value can be formed with any degree of accuracy. Rockingham

abounds with fruits of various kinds, particularly apples and peaches, from which large quantities of cider and brandy is made yearly for home consumption and some for market.

Perhaps there is no part of the state where the people are nearer upon a medium, than in this county; this may be easily accounted for, when it is recollected that the price of land has always been low in comparison with lands of an equal quality in the eastern part of the state. The most of our farmers and planters live on lands of their own which give them an air of independence, rarely to be met with in countries where the laboring part of the community are vassals and dependants on the rich. It is not however, to be inferred from this, that there are no men of wealth in the county, on the contrary, there are many, some of which are of respectable standing in society.

Leaksville and Wentworth are the only towns in the county, and they at present scarcely deserve the name. Leaksville, stands on a high bluff on the north side of Dan river, near its confluence with Smith river, and within one mile of the above mentioned mill seat the latter. This is a most delightful spot and the best situated for trade, perhaps, of any in the county, as it commands a very extensive back country, the produce of which (in consequence of a navigation free of obstructions up and down the river) would inevitably center here. It was established by an act of assembly passed some years ago, but in consequence of a failure to complete the navigation of the Roanoke (on which contingency its fate depends) it has as yet made but a small progress. We cannot, however, in justice to its founder (John Leak, Esq., whose zeal for the public welfare far exceeded his ability) omit to premise, that at some future period, when public spirit and patriotism shall have assumed their proper stations, this town will rise to that degree and state of usefulness, which nature, and its local situation have seemed to assign to it. Wentworth, which is the county town, where our courts of justice are held, is remarkable for

~~except~~ nothing except its high and healthy situation it stands about three miles south of the River Dan, in a poor and broken part of the county, and near its center; we have here a tolerable wooden court house, painted, and a common goal build of wood and stone, the rooms of which are dark and miserable beyond description; there are likewise some public houses for the accommodation of strangers, and the citizens generally though scarcely enough for so populous a county. The buildings in this county are generally of wood, some frame but the greater part of hewn logs, covered with shingles with brick and stone chimneys, which render them more warm and comfortable than elegant.

Although agriculture in the present state, is much inferior to what might be expected in a country embracing such a variety of soil, and a climate favorable to the production of every necessary of life, yet it must be acknowledged, that considerable progress have been made whithin a few years past. The culture of tobacco and Indian corn (so destructive to our best lands) which have long been persued with avidity by most of the planters has of late years, in some degree given way to a rotation of crops, consisting of Indian corn, oats and wheat—wheat, for exportation, might be raised in the greatest abundance, if proper encouragement was given by the building of mills suitable for manufacturing it into flour, and a ~~strong~~ hope is entertained, that e'er long, some of our wealthy and enterprising citizens, will see the necessity, or at least find it to their interest, to erect mills on some of the most eligible seats for the purpose above mentioned. It will be seen, by what has already been said that great improvements have been made in agriculture—and it is no less a fact, that considerable improvements have also been made, in our domestic manufactures; particularly in the following articles, to-wit: Saddles, hats, boots, shoes, cabinet ware, carpenter and house joiners, millwrights, rifle and smoothe bore guns, the two latter of which are executed in the neatest and best manner by Capt. Joshua Farrington, equal, if not superior to any imported, nor must it be forgotten, that the ladies

have also made as great a progress in their household manufactures, which has created in some degree a spirit of emulation, to vie with each other, who shall be foremost, nor is it uncommon, to see both gentlemen and ladies of the first respectability, in all public places of resort, dressed in a full suit of homespun, which would do honor to the citizens of any country. The breed of horses have much improved, but cattle, sheep and hogs have somewhat degenerated, owing chiefly to the range being eaten out.

Agreeably to the return of the assistant marshal, there are in this country 126 stills in use, from which vast quantities of whiskey and brandy is made yearly, part of which is exported to the adjoining states, which very much increase the wealth of those who have them in use. Cotton gins are common throughout the county, the number not known, but fully sufficient to clean all the cotton for market and home consumption.

Several tan yards have been erected in this county, which would be of the greatest utility, were it not for the prevailing practice of driving our beef to market.

Here, as in most parts of the back country, commerce and trade is engrossed by a few enterprising individuals, who generally keep the people in debt to them; too many of our farmers and planters, owe the proceeds of their crop to the merchant before it is put into the ground, which is the principal cause of the scarcity of cash so often felt, and complained of in this part of the state. Some of our planters role their tobacco, but the greater part of them amke use of wagons for the conveyance ~~xx~~ of their surplus produce to market.

Some shad, and a variety of fresh water fish are caught here, though scarcely enough for neighborhood consumption. The sturgeon is an inhabitant of the Dan, and is sometimes caught from seven to 10 feet long. The wild game, which about 40 years ago were found here in the greatest plenty, have for several years been on the decline; the deer, though few are hunted by men and hounds with such eagerness and avidity that it is very rare to see one. Fur of various kinds is still caught to a considerable amount, the most of which is manufactured into hats for home consumption.

The present state of society presages the most ~~xxx~~ flattering consequences, and no people in the state, perhaps, have made a greater progress in civilization in the

last few years, than the citizens of Rockingham; they are in general hospitable to strangers, and appear to affect what may be called a snug, rather than a splendid way of living.

We have some physicians and attorneys, whose practice and moral character entitle them to the patronage of an enlightened public, and men of the first natural abilities, both now and heretofore, have often been found in the humble walks of life. There have been no schools established for the education of youth, more than for a common English education of course, we have but few men of science or a classical education, and although we cannot boast of the progress of literature, the comparative difference in the respect, between the present time and 25 years ago, is almost beyond conception.

There is but one framed meeting house in the county, and that was built by mutual subscription, and therefore open to all denominations. There are a great many (the number not known) both Baptists and Methodist houses of worship built in the most cheapest manner of hewn logs, etc., which are generally large and convenient. Those two professions are the prevailing ones in the county, supposed to be nearly equal in number of communicant members, etc. There are but few Presbyterians compared with the number of the above named societies, and still fewer of Universalists, but there some, and perhaps more than is generally believed.

Dysenteries and nervous fevers, etc., are the most prevalent diseases in the summer and fall season. Rheumatism, pluersy and other inflammatory complaints are most common in the winter and spring season, intermittant fevers, agues, etc., which were formerly a sore scourge to the inhabitants of Dan river, have of late years entirely disappeared.

Dancing and horse racing are the only amusements practiced by the citizens of this county, and these, have in some degree fallen off within a few years past. Iforbear to mention that vile and abominable practice of card playing, etc., which is so prevalent at our county court houses, taverns, etc., and many other nefarious



practices to delude the young and unwary, as they cannot be too severely reprehended by every honest and patriotic citizen.

The foregoing description has been thrown together under circumstances not most favorable; nay I am fully sensible of its defects in point of style, but the substance matter as far as it goes therein contained, I believe is substantially ~~correct~~ correct.

#### HISTORICAL FACTS

##### Editors Review:

I was very much interested in reading an article in your paper of recent date written by Alexander Snead and published in the Wilmington Star. Would like to say that he was my great-great-uncle. I own and live on his farm and live in the same house (with some additions to the house) that he built in 1793. He died in 1825 and is buried at the edge of the yard. The inscription on the rock at his grave can be easily read. He was register of deeds of Rockingham county about 1800. I have some deeds to land written by him in 1800. I have this year a colored tenant on the farm whose grandfather was a slave of Alexander Snead.

This farm has been in possession of the Snead family since 1793 and some of the family has lived on the place since that time.

W. L. Snead

Stoneville, North Carolina