

Edgecombe County, NC - Agricultural Report -1811, by Jeremiah Battle [with minor edits]

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TARBOROUGH, EDGECOMBE COUNTY, N. C.

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EDGECOMBE COUNTY, NC

We have been recently favored with the perusal of a manuscript copy of a statistical and historical account of Edgecombe County, first presented to the Agricultural Society of said County, by Jeremiah Battle, 1811 and transcribed by permission of Gov. Swain, from the manuscript copy, in his possession, at Chapel Hill, April 25th 1840, by W. F. Dancy, Esq. from which we take the following extracts.

The County of Edgecombe extends about forty miles from North to South, and thirty from East to West. It is generally a level county, with gentle elevations; and no destitute of pleasant and healthy situations. The soil is exceedingly diversified, consisting of a gradation from poor piney woods, to a rich swamp land, lying on the creeks and river. The proportion of these is about three-fourths of the former to one-fourth of the latter. The best river land produces abundantly of Indian corn, peas, wheat, rye, oats, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, cotton, flax, and it is believed some spots are well adapted to the culture of hemp. The best piney land produces everything that the river land does, but not in the same degree of perfection; and the most barren piney lands are yet valuable, where they are not too remote from navigation, for the tar and turpentine they afford. The lands on the river are valued from \$10 to \$20 per acre; on the creeks, from \$5 to \$10; and the piney woods from \$1 to \$5.

In the county there is a great variety of excellent timbers, viz; on the river and creeks are various species of oak, poplar, hickory, black walnut, mulberry, and ash. The swamps afford excellent cypress, juniper and white oak. But the pine timber is perhaps still more valuable, being tall straight and well calculated for building. These different situations abound in various other growths as cedar, elm, sugar maple, dogwood, sassafras, chinquapin, sweet gum, black gum, whortleberry, and grape vine.

The forests, fields, and gardens also abound in shrubs and plants that serve the purposes of medicine and rural arts. The high and low myrtle, the gallberry, the several kinds of rhus, particularly the common sumach, wild turnip, dock, poke, thorn apple, and night shade. Virginia snake root, pocoon. The latter appears to be a species of turmeric, growing spontaneously in rich soils, and will in time probably become an important article of the *materia medica*. The hortular plants, roots, and herbs, are colewort, cabbage, lettuce, spinage, parsley, cresses, onions, celery, radishes, carrots, parsnips, turnips, and asparagus. There are fruit trees in abundance, particularly apple, pear, plum, cherry, nectarine, and peach.

The latter comes very soon to perfection but is subject soon to decay, the owners never having adopted any of the preservation. There are many good springs on the river and creeks, and the wells in the piney woods are generally good.

FIRST SETTLED

When the county was first settled cannot be well ascertained from any document here; but it was probably prior to the year 1726, the oldest land patents we've dealt with, bearing this date. As the first settlement of the continent commenced at the mouths of rivers, so these interior settlements commenced at the mouth of creeks progressing upwards, as the natives gave ground. At the mouth of Town Creek it is believed, was the first settlement in the county. The site of Tarborough, and its vicinity, were settled at an early period. The Indians inhabiting these parts were driven by some of the settlers at Bath across Contentnea (creek), where they made a stand and built and dwelt for several years, but were at length besieged and destroyed. The ruins of their forts are now to be seen in Greene County.

But the greatest number of its settlers came from Virginia. The principal object of the early settlers appears to have been the enjoyment of ease and idleness, and there is not perhaps a spot in the State where a mere subsistence was and still is more easily procured than here. The chief and almost entire occupation was hunting and rearing stock, which consisted principally of horses and cattle. The former ran wild and were pursued and

taken when necessity required. Cattle were of more value and were kept. Agriculture was scarcely thought of. The settlers were most of their time under the necessity of eating meat without bread. One horse and plough served a whole neighborhood.

About the year 1740, the natives were numerous in this part of the country, and the land being mostly vacant, none could be sold except such as had some improvement, and then low. Edgecombe retains one of the most ancient names of any County in the State; it formerly included the counties of Northampton, Halifax, Martin, Nash, and several others. This county affords but little historical information. It may be worthy of remark, however, and is much to the credit of the county, that its inhabitants formerly were and still are docile, peaceable, and easily governed. This is evinced by adverting to the circumstances of the late revolution. The mandate of a self-created power, termed a Committee, which engrossed all the authority both civil and military, were then as implacably obeyed as are now the laws of our Legislature. There was no opposition to their orders, and none endeavored to evade them, except the Tories who were actuated perhaps more from cowardice than principle. A part of these embodied themselves in the southwest part of the county, and also a considerable number in the northeast, for the purpose of resistance. But, all were dispersed without bloodshed. In effecting this Cols. [Whitmel] Hill and [William] Williams, of Martin [County], were instrumental. A few Scotch merchants resided in the county at the commencement of the revolution; but they preferred remaining subjects of Great Britain, and of consequence left the county under the expulsion law.

No part of this county was ever a scene of action during the war, but the inhabitants were not idle spectators; both officers and soldiers were ready at all times to serve their country. It would be unpardonable, on this occasion, not to mention the merits of Col. Jonas Johnston, who rose from obscurity and acted a conspicuous part in our revolutionary struggle. Henry Irwin had long been a resident and merchant of Tarboro. He took an active part in our differences with Great Britain, and perhaps no man, according to his situation made a greater sacrifice to his country. He at an early period of the war obtained a Lieutenant Colonel's commission in the regular army [Continental Line].

He bade adieu to his family of infant children and to his ease, and joined the army, alas! to return home no more. He fell in the battle of Germantown, bravely fighting in the cause of his country. As the enemy ultimately kept the field of battle, his body was never recovered that it might receive the honors due to his merits. [Lt.] Col. Isaac Sessoms was a great Whig, and very active in the service of his country. He was Senator from this county when the Legislature sat at Newbern, and he there died.

[Other full Colonel/Commandants over the Edgecombe County Regiment of Militia were Col. William Haywood, Col. Exum Lewis, and Col. Joseph J. Clinch. Not mentioned above, Col. Jonas Johnston was mortally wounded at the SC battle of Stono Ferry on June 20, 1779, and he died on his way back home.]

RIVERS, WATERS, BRIDGES

Tar River or Pamlico, is the only river in the county. Both these are probably Indian names. It appears that Roanoke was considered, even by the natives, who lived in the woods, as a sickly place. Those who changed their residence from that river to this, called this Tar river, signifying, it is said, the river of health. It rises in Granville county, and runs through Franklin, Nash, Edgecombe, Pitt, and Beaufort counties, and empties into Pamlico sound. It is navigable a considerable part of the year for boats of a particular construction, carrying from 200 to 400 barrels as high up as 15 miles above Tarboro, in a straight direction, which is 40 or 50 by water.

That portion of Tar river which passes through Edgecombe, meanders through a tract of 75 miles, from Nash to Pitt counties. It is from 50 to 125 yards wide. Its banks are in many places low and fertile, and are occasionally subject to be inundated by freshets. It is notorious that the waters in our creeks and especially Tar River, have greatly diminished within these twenty or thirty years past; which circumstance tends greatly to enhance the value of those lands. Formerly the destruction of crops in these low grounds was so frequent as to render even a comfortable subsistence precarious to those who cultivated no other; whereas it is now a rare occurrence for a crop to be destroyed by an inundation.

Where the line dividing Edgecombe from Nash crosses the river, there commences a cataract which extends down the river a quarter of a mile. The bed of the river and its banks are covered with rocks of all sizes under

20 feet in diameter, and when the water is high, in passing over and amongst these rocks, the noise may be heard four or five miles. This cataract, usually denominated the Great Falls is attended with several advantages. It affords seats for three grist mills and a saw mill, some of which have been running 60 or 70 years, and seldom stop for want of water.

At the commencement of the Great Falls, mentioned above is an Island, containing about 15 acres, and is called Panther Island, from it's formerly being the habitation of those animals. There is another island, about the termination of this cataract of a smaller size and has been in cultivation. These are all the islands worthy to be noticed, except those interspersed among the swamps of Coneto, to be mentioned hereafter.

Tar River has two bridges in the county. The most considerable one is at Tarboro. It is about 200 yards long, well built, and wide enough for two carriages to pass abreast. Eight miles above is Teat's Bridge, which is also built and supported at the public expense. The tributary streams of Tar River are on the north side, Deep Creek, Fishing Creek, and Swift Creek; on the south side, Town Creek, Hendrick's Creek, and others of less note. Deep Creek is an inconsiderable stream and falls into Fishing Creek near its mouth. Fishing Creek rises in Granville County, and after passing through Franklin forms a considerable part of the boundary between Halifax and Edgecombe, and falls into Tar River three miles above Tarboro, in a straight direction. An Act of Assembly was passed a few years ago, for opening and making navigable this creek, which has been partly effected. When water is flush, it admits flat bottom boats, carrying 100 to 200 barrels as far up as Wyatt's Bridge which is 25 miles above Tarboro by land, and about 70 by water. It has four bridges Wyatt's, Speir's, Coffield's, and Sessum's, the two first are built and supported at the joint expense of these two counties.

Sessom's bridge is about 10 miles above Tarboro by land. Swift Creek is narrow, but long. It heads in Franklin, and is there called Sandy Creek. It falls into Tar River between Teat's Bridge and Fishing Creek; it has lately been cleared out for the passage of considerable boats. Town Creek is not navigable, but is larger than Deep Creek. It joins Tar River 10 miles below Tarboro. Hendricks's Creek is a small stream, but is well supplied with springs. This little creek has a bridge across it near Tarboro. Contentnea is a pretty considerable creek and is navigable for small craft, as high up as Rountree's Bridge, which is five or six miles above Stanton's Bridge.

This creek is the boundary between Wayne and Greene Counties, forms the southern boundary of Edgecombe, and falls into Neuse River.

SWAMPS

Swamps abound in several parts of the county. Toisnot is extensive, lies in the southern part of the county, and empties into Contentnea two or three miles below Stanton's Bridge. It affords good range for stock. A considerable quantity of pork, beef, and mutton are annually driven from this neighborhood to Virginia. This water course has three bridges across it - White Oak Swamp runs into Tosnoe, and has one bridge. Tyan Cokey Swamp empties into Town Creek on the north side. It formerly afforded good range for stock, but at present this advantage is inconsiderable, and the land adjacent is generally poor. It has one bridge near which is a store, where naval stores and some other articles of produce are taken. It is called Trade field. The eastern section of the county abounds in swamps of extensive fertility and containing from 50 to 500 acres. They diverge from Coneto Creek, which falls into Tar River below Penny Hill, in Pitt County.

Their surface is in many places strictly covered with reeds, which in warm dry winters afford excellent food for cattle, as they suffer no permanent injury from the feeding of stock.

It is believed that such of these swamps, as lie contiguous to the river, of which there are many, might be rendered arable, by means of ditches; some difficulties would attend, and will perhaps, for some years, prevent any considerable enterprises by the proprietors. These swamps are flat, and the river which is two or three miles off, is the only place to which the water could be conveyed; and as the soil though rich is sandy, the ditches would soon fill up unless they were lined with wood. These swamps have been resorted to for manure, which is found very productive. A considerable quantity of pork is raised here and brought to market. Bees thrive well here. More honey and wax are brought thence to market, than from any other part of the county. Among these swamps are interspersed a number of islands, the most of which are inhabited. The soil is light and sandy, but produces very kindly corn, peas, potatoes, cotton, flax, and etc., and is much better in dry

seasons than in wet. The crop of the year 1810, which was excessively dry, was the best that had been produced here for many years. Whereas on the stiff low lands, the crops were greatly injured by the drought.

ROADS

Roads, though sufficiently numerous for the convenience of traveling, are far from being kept in good repair. Not one in the county five miles in length is in such order as the laws prescribe. It must be attributed to a want of public spirit, or of a more advanced state of civilization. The stigma must rest on the overseers, state attorneys and grand juries. Some little exertion has of late been made, but the effect has been only to get a few sign boards and mile posts erected, and in this respect we now excel the adjacent counties.

MEDICINAL SPRINGS

There are several medicinal springs in the county. One about three miles from Tarborough is the most noted. The water is fresh, transparent, and not unpleasant to most palates. Large draughts of it operate on the stomach, bowels, pores, or kidneys, but principally the latter. It is thought wholesome as a common drink, and has been in pretty general use by a family living near it. Another medicinal spring formerly much noted for its healing qualities, is situated in the bottom of Town Creek, and is now covered by a mill lately erected over it site. The water was cold transparent, and active in its operations on the human system. It flowed from an aperture, not less than ten feet in depth, below the bed of the creek and was accessible only in dry times.

NATURAL CURIOSITIES

There are not many natural curiosities to be met with in the county. In the bank of the river many feet above its bed are discovered quantities of marine substances, shells of various sorts and sizes, fish bones, shark's teeth, and etc. In the bed of the river, and in Fishing Creek are found as many as sixteen restectree or joints of the back bone of some fish, ten inches in diameter, lying in their proper order; also pieces of ribs, one of which is about seven inches in length and weighs fourteen ounces. These bones are perfectly petrified. In digging a well near Tarboro was discovered, many feet below the surface a small oak tree, in a horizontal position, perfectly sound. In digging another well when it was expected the water would make its appearance, some bunches of reeds were found in a muddy, logy soil, from whence there was never any good water produced.

PRODUCTIONS

The county affords a great variety of productions, that are immediately conducive to the comfortable subsistence of man, and it is evident penury cannot exist to any extent where there is a surplus of such commodities as are exhibited in the table annexed; which affords a pretty correct view of the average annual amount of the different kinds of surplus produce, that are collected or raised in the county, and sent out to foreign markets. In the table it will be seen that naval stores hold a respectable rank as a staple commodity; from which we discover that the pine, which affords one of the most striking marks of sterility of soil, is still entitled to great consideration, more especially when contiguous to rich lands or navigable waters. A large proportion of the county abounds in them. They serve for fencing and building, better than any other timber; but in addition to these advantages, they yield to the laborer a greater profit than our best lands would do by farming. An experienced hand can make from 100 to 200 barrels of turpentine in a year, including the making of barrels to hold it; while the expenses of carrying on the work are extremely small. Tar is also made from the old trees that have been lying on the ground long enough to use the sap.

A hand can work to the greatest advantage by making both tar and turpentine, during the same year; the former being attended to in the fall and winter, when from the weakness of the sun's heat, the trees will not yield turpentine. The natives of this county knew but little of these advantages and would have starved, had they been possessed of no other means of subsistence. Emigrants from Virginia and the northeastern counties of this state, settled on these barren lands, and converted the pines into meat, bread, and money.

From the table exhibiting the average annual amount of surplus produce, collected and exported from Edgecombe County, it appears that in 1811, there were 14 stores in Tarboro and 7 in other parts of the county, making 21 stores, that annually exported about 6,325 barrels corn, 6,850 bushes peas, 2,042 barrels pork, 8,210

lbs. tallow, 8,170 lbs. beeswax, 43,240 lbs. cotton, 1,292 bushels flaxseed, 9,413 barrels naval stores, 124,300 lbs. bacon, 556 kegs lard, 243 hhds tobacco, 145 barrels brandy, 73 barrels flour, 2,740 bushels wheat, 150 fur skins, 158 bushels beans, 70 bushels oats, 101 barrels black lead, and 3,000 lbs. beef.

In addition to the foregoing statement, it may not be amiss to insert the average annual amount of produces sent out of the county by 75 farmers, which does not pass through any of the above named markets, to wit: Namely, 150 bushels of wheat, 1,375 barrels naval stores, 1,418,900 lbs. of live pork, 15,600 lbs. beef, 190 head sheep, 20,000 lbs. bacon, 1,170 barrels corn, besides these articles for exportation, the town is generally well supplied from the country with fresh beef, lambs, pigs, poultry, eggs, butter, honey, fruit, melons, roots, etc.

TOWNS

Tarborough is the only town in the county. It is handsomely situated on the south west bank of Tar River, just above the mouth of Hendrick's Creek, in latitude 35° 45'. It is 45 miles west by north from Washington, 36 south of Halifax, 83 northwest of Newbern, and 68 east of Raleigh. It was laid off into lots in the year 1760. The streets are 72 feet wide, and cross each other at right angles, leaving squares of two acres each. These squares being divided into half acre lots, makes every lot front two streets. There are about 50 private houses in it, and generally from 15 to 20 stores, a church, jail, tobacco warehouse, and a large court house, which in the year 1785 was used for the sitting of the state legislature. There are several good springs adjacent to the town, but for culinary uses almost every family has a well, and some of these wells afford good water the greatest part of the year. This place affords good encouragement to all industrious persons, particularly mechanics of almost every description; 60 or 70 mechanics have had full employment here at one time. Merchants generally do well here, and there has scarcely been an instance of failure in the place.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture with us is still in its rude state. Lands are too cheap and plenty for farmers to be induced to quit their accustomed plans for the purpose of making the most of a given spot. The productions however, will show that the people are neither very indolent nor entirely ignorant of the advantages of farming. The usual plan appears to be, to clear and put into cultivation as large an extent of ground as practicable, and to exhaust it as fast as a series of grain crops can do it. A few years of this mode of cultivation renders it necessary to give it rest every other year; at which times it is either sowed in small grain, or abandoned to the weeds. It is at length entirely worn out, while other ground is cleared to supply its place.

Manuring and other modes of improvement cannot well enter into our method of tillage, the whole time being spent in extending the space of cultivation.

MANUFACTURES

The manufactories are only such as serve our domestic purposes, and consist of the following viz: looms 933 in number, in which are woven annually about 150,000 yards of different kinds of cloth, which at an average price of 40 cents per yard is worth \$60,000. 159 distilleries, in which are annually distilled 39,000 gallons of peach and apple brandy, worth at 75 cents per gallon \$29,250. 439 tanneries, in which are tanned annually 1,964 hides, worth at \$4.00 each, \$7,856.

Mechanics---31 blacksmith shops, 4 hatters shops, 2 cabinet shops, 6 saddlers shops, of these there is only one of the latter kept up during the year, in this there is work done to the annual amount of \$4,000; 3 carriage shops, only one of which is regularly kept up, in which there is work done annually to the amount of \$4,500; 3 shoemakers shops, one of which sells work to the amount of \$2,999. Besides these there are others of less note, such as turners, coopers, wheelwrights, etc.

Labor saving machines there are 29 cotton machines, working 508 saws, some of which go by hand, some by horse, and some by water. There are also a few corn shelling machines in the county, and some wheat fans; the latter are in considerable demand, and can be hired for a dollar per day.

COMMERCE

The commerce of this place is carried on to great disadvantage. The navigation is precarious, as there is usually a considerable part of the year, that the water is too low for boats to have an easy passage from Tarboro to Washington. Tarboro is the principal market for this and some of the adjacent counties. The produce is carried down the river to Washington in long flat-bottomed boats, carrying from 200 to 400 barrels, and drawing from two to three feet water. A part of the produce is bartered in Washington for West India goods, but the greater part is shipped to the northern markets, principally to Norfolk, Baltimore, and New York, where it is sold for cash or bills, by which means the merchants here are enabled to make remittances to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York, from whence they receive their dry goods.

SCHOOLS, ETC.

There are 17 schools in the county, at which are about 400 scholars. Nothing more is attempted to be taught in them than the elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic; and but few of the teachers are qualified to do justice to these. Notwithstanding this apparently infant state of literature, we may easily discover that it is progressing; for 50 years ago there was not more than one or two schools in the limits of the whole county.

For want of an academy in this county, several have sent to those in the adjacent ones, viz; at Westville and Vine Hill.

Some attempts have been made to procure libraries, but this was never effected except by a society that was in existence about 16 years ago. On the dissolution of that body, the books were scattered abroad and divided among those who contributed them to the establishment. (The Agriculture Society has appropriated a sum of money to procure an Agricultural Library. Some donations of books are made for this purpose.)

On the 4th day of July, 1810, proposals were made for the establishment of a Society for the promotion of agriculture and the arts. The plan has succeeded so far as to go into operation. It has now upwards of 30 respectable members, whose public spirit is thus manifested, greatly to their credit and it is hoped to the benefit of the county. The Society convene on the second day of every Court of Quarter Session, in the county, adjourning from day to day as they see fit.

The only religious denominations in the county are Methodist and Baptist. The former are not numerous, but they have several places of worship in the county, and frequently hold meetings in town. The number of their communicants is not ascertained. The Baptist had eight meeting houses in the year 1810, and about 520 communicants. Since which there have been 250 added, and another meeting house is building near the place Shellbanks, and is to bear that name.

We have occasionally been visited by storms. The country suffered much by one which took place on the 7th September 1769. It destroyed crops, mast trees, mills, etc. Five years afterwards was another, which was not so destructive here, but did great damage at sea. "The August gust," as it was called, which was in the year 1796, destroyed many mills and bridges, crops were also much injured, but the trees were not greatly hurt. In April of 1798, a tornado passed through the county, and through Tarboro, which leveled trees and houses as it passed. In Tarboro several houses and chimneys were blown down. About six years ago, on the 22nd August, was a storm, which was very destructive to crops and trees in many places.