

## **Seeds of Change: The Evolution of Post-War Eastern North Carolina**

**By Dr. Christopher Arris Oakley, 2010**

### **The Founding and Growth of Greenville and Pitt County**

In 1760, the North Carolina colonial government established Pitt County in eastern North Carolina. Named after William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, Pitt County was 650 square miles and contained a population of about 2,600. In 1771, Richard Evans, a delegate to the colonial assembly, donated 100 acres of land to North Carolina in order for the government to found a town to be the political and commercial center of Pitt County. Named after Governor Josiah Martin, Martinsborough was located adjacent to the Tar River and soon became the county's seat of government. In 1787, the General Assembly changed the town's name to Greenville to honor the late General Nathanael Greene, the hero of the Battle of Guilford Court House, an important moment in the American Revolution. Over time, the name was shortened to Greenville.

Greenville and Pitt County grew slowly in the early 1800s. Most of the residents of the county were farmers, either small land-owners or mid-sized planters, some of whom owned slaves. They grew tobacco, cotton, and corn, while also raising cattle and hogs. But the state's economy suffered in the early nineteenth century, mostly because of transportation and communication problems. Unlike other states, North Carolina lacked a good deep water port with direct access to the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, the state's internal transportation system was inadequate. During the Jeffersonian Era, the General Assembly clung to its ideals of limited government and resisted investing in internal improvements, which led to North Carolina earning a reputation as "The Rip Van Winkle State," a state asleep while others in the new union took advantage of an emerging market economy. Consequently, many Tar Heels left, moving to other states in search of better economic opportunities. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, the state's economy began to grow, as did its population. Following the adoption of a new state constitution in 1835, North Carolina politicians tried to improve the state's infrastructure. During the "Whig Era" of the 1840s, the state's economy grew. Pitt County leaders took advantage of these internal improvements to modernize the local economy. Better roads, improved ferries and bridges, and new steamships on the Tar River made it much easier for Pitt County farmers and traders to export and import goods, particularly King Cotton, the boom crop of the 1800s...

Initially hesitant to secede from the United States, North Carolina became an "unwilling Hercules" during the Civil War, contributing greatly to the southern war effort. More than 2,000 men from Pitt County served in the war, including General Bryan Grimes, whose family owned the county's largest plantation. The end of the war meant major changes for eastern North Carolina. Most importantly, it meant freedom for millions of African Americans. The end of the war, however, did not destroy the lucrative cotton economy. In the 1870s, King Cotton still reigned in the small town of Greenville, which had a population of less than 1,000, though tenant-farming and sharecropping had replaced slavery as the primary source of cheap agricultural labor in eastern North Carolina.

The establishment of a normal school also contributed to the growth of Greenville. In the early 1900s, Governor Charles Aycock asked the General Assembly for funds to expand North Carolina's public school system. According to Aycock, North Carolina's educational system was inadequate and lagged behind

many other states. The governor argued that spending money to improve educational opportunities would be a long-term investment, an important step in preparing the state for the twentieth century. But new public schools required new instructors, and these teachers needed to be trained properly and professionally to do their jobs. To staff the new public schools in rural eastern North Carolina, the General Assembly allocated funds for a normal school in Greenville. In 1909, more than 100 students enrolled in the new East Carolina Teachers Training School. Twelve years later, the normal school became East Carolina Teachers College (ECTC), a four-year degree granting institution. The expansion of ECTC in the twentieth century would contribute greatly to the growth of Greenville and Pitt County.

The economic prosperity of the early twentieth century benefitted some Greenvillians more than others. The Civil War and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) ended slavery, but post-war reconstruction failed to deal with other questions regarding African Americans and their political, social, and economic status in the state. After Conservative Democrats "redeemed" the North Carolina government, the passage of new Jim Crow laws divided the states' population into two racial categories and limited the rights and freedoms of African Americans. A segregated school system segregated white and "colored" children. Perhaps most significantly, poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses disfranchised African Americans, thus ensuring that they would not have a voice in the decision making process. In the Jim Crow South of the early twentieth century, non-white North Carolinians remained secondary citizens.

After two decades of economic growth, the Great Depression devastated eastern North Carolina in the 1930s. Farmers were hit the hardest, as crop prices, and thus farm incomes, plummeted. For example, in 1929, cotton sold for around 17 cents per pound in the state, but in 1932 it was selling for less than 7 cents per pound, causing farmers, unable to pay their taxes and mortgages, to lose their land. The depression affected others as well, as manufacturing plants closed and banks failed. These desperate times drove formerly honest men into crime as they stole to provide for their families. After being caught stealing blackberries, one man told a Sheriff "we don't want to do anything wrong because we are law abiding people, but we are desperate, and we are liable to do anything before we see our wives and children starve." Initially, both the federal and state governments were incapable of dealing with the crises. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 promised a "New Deal" for Americans. Some of FDR's programs, such as the controversial Agricultural Adjustment Act, which tried to raise crop prices by limiting supply, helped farmers in eastern North Carolina, but the depression continued into the late 1930s.

### **Seeds of Change: Eastern North Carolina in the Post-War Years**

The United States economy boomed in the post-war years. From 1945 to 1960, the Gross National Product increased 250 percent, unemployment averaged less than five percent, and the inflation rate hovered around three percent. Several factors contributed to this economic prosperity. First, because WWII was primarily fought on foreign soil, the United States emerged from the war relatively unscathed, at least when compared to other industrial nations. Secondly, many Americans, restricted by war-time rationing, accumulated savings accounts in the early 1940s. When the war ended, many went on spending sprees, driving commercial and retail growth. Thirdly, the "Baby Boom" also contributed to economic activity. And finally, the GI Bill, established in 1944 to help servicemen readjust to civilian life, also stimulated the economy by offering low rate loans and mortgages, as well as financial aid for college.

The state of North Carolina was at the forefront of this roaring post-war economy. Prior to the 1940s, North Carolina, particularly the eastern coastal plain, was overwhelmingly agricultural. Before the war, more than one-half of the state's workers were connected to agriculture. But by 1970, less than ten percent were employed in the agrarian sector, as technological changes modernized farming in the state. New tractors and pesticides made farming more efficient, thus making agriculture more capital intensive. In the mid twentieth century, the size of farms in the state increased, while the number decreased. In 1940, there were 280,000 farms in North Carolina, with an average output of less than \$800 per farm. By the 1970s, there were about 120,000 farms with an average output of \$34,000.

As agriculture became less dependent on labor, the manufacturing sector of the state's economy expanded, as many North Carolinians traded pitchforks and shovels for hardhats and timecards. Political leaders encouraged businesses and factories to relocate to the Tar Heel state, which was an attractive option for new industry. In the 1920s, North Carolina had earned a reputation as "the goods road state" for investing in the construction and paving of new highways. As noted above, the federal government helped improve the state's infrastructure in the 1940s, and the state also had an abundance of cheap land and non-union labor. In 1947, the General Assembly passed "right to work" legislation, making it difficult for union organizers in the state, and thus keeping manufacturing wages lower than in other states. Consequently, in the mid 1900s, North Carolina became the most industrialized state in the South.

In Pitt County, the political leaders of Greenville, especially Mayor Eugene West, sought to diversify and expand the city's economy in the 1950s. West and others improved Greenville's infrastructure by building new roads, paving old ones, expanding the airport, advocating urban renewal, and improving sewage and utility facilities. Road construction was especially important in the 1950s, as automobiles and trucks became vital to the economy. This investment, along with Pitt County's cheap land and labor, attracted new manufacturing industries, such as Union Carbide and Fieldcrest Mills. In 1964, Pitt Technical Institute, which eventually became Pitt Community College, opened to provide training for the region's future workers. At the same time, Greenville remained a center for the thriving tobacco industry in the 1950s, with more than fifteen facilities located in the city's "warehouse" district.

The post-war growth of East Carolina Teachers College also contributed to economic growth and social change in Greenville. In 1951, under the leadership of John Decatur Messick, ECTC became East Carolina College (ECC) and offered four-year degrees. By 1960, ECC had 6,000 students, making it the third largest institution of higher learning in the state. More students and faculty members meant new classrooms, more dorms, an expanded library, and new businesses, especially restaurants and retail stores. ECC also expanded its varsity athletic programs, playing other colleges in a variety of sports, such as basketball, baseball, and football. In the 1950s and 1960s, athletics became a vital part of the collegiate experience. In the 1960s, President Leo Jenkins led the drive to attain university status for East Carolina, which was ultimately achieved in 1967. East Carolina University (ECU) subsequently restructured and organized new schools, including nursing, business, education, music, art, and arts and sciences.

Geography and climate played a significant role in the history of Greenville in the mid 1900s. Pitt County is located on the Coastal Plain, a region between the red rocky clay and rolling hills of the Piedmont and the state's long and swampy coast-line. The soil in the Coastal Plain remained fertile in the twentieth century, and thus agriculture was still important to the local economy, especially tobacco, which was much more regulated and controlled than it had been in the early 1900s. Because of its proximity to the coast and location adjacent to the Tar River, Greenville was victimized by numerous storms, including

hurricanes in the late summer and early fall. Hurricanes are rated by their wind-speeds, but it is typically the amount of rainfall that has caused the most trouble for Greenville residents. With such a low elevation and no where for the excess water to go, flooding has been a problem in Pitt County, especially those areas along the Tar River. In the spring, severe thunderstorms and tornadoes have been nuisances, as has the occasional winter snow storm. But overall, Pitt County's temperate climate, especially in the winter, makes for pleasant living conditions. As centralized air conditioning became common in post-war houses and other buildings, and thus allowed protection from the heat and humidity of the summer months in eastern North Carolina, Greenville became an attractive destination for families fleeing the rust belt for the prosperous sun belt.

The end of World War II also meant the beginning of a new war, an ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. This Cold War would dominate foreign affairs until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Both sides spent billions of dollars on defense, including new nuclear weapons, in preparation for a potential showdown between the world's two superpowers. Many Americans worried that any direct confrontation between the USSR and the USA might lead to WWII. The fear of nuclear war intensified in 1957 when the Russians launched the satellite Sputnik into space. A few years later, this Cold War almost turned very hot over the location of Soviet missiles in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy (who in 1960 became the first Presidential candidate to visit Greenville) ultimately was able to diffuse the situation by negotiating an agreement with the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

The escalation of the Cold War directly affected eastern North Carolina, and almost led to a nuclear disaster. The state's military bases, mostly located in the east, benefitted from the increase in military spending. In the early 1960s, bombers from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, about sixty miles southwest of Greenville, flew round-the-clock missions to ensure readiness in case of a Soviet strike. In January of 1961, a B-52 armed with two atomic weapons crashed in a field. Three crew members died in the crash; five others successfully ejected and parachuted safely to the ground. One of the atomic bombs was recovered near the crash site, but the core of the other one remains buried deep underground in a field near the small community of Faro, located just north of Goldsboro.

In the mid 1950s, the Cold War also heightened the fear of espionage and communist infiltration. Consequently, many Americans began to equate social and political conformity with patriotism. Americans who criticized the government, capitalism, or the military were labeled "anti-American." While campaigning, Wisconsin politician Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of known communists currently working within the federal government. As a new Red Scare swept the nation, some American citizens were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where they had their political ideas challenged and their civil rights denied. In Hollywood, writers, directors, and actors were blacklisted for their connections, real or imagined, to subversive groups. Other citizens were ostracized for political and beliefs that seemed out of the mainstream.

This emphasis on conformity was readily apparent in the popular culture of the 1950s, especially on television, a powerful new form of mass communication. In 1946, there were less than 20,000 TV sets in the entire country. By 1957, however, there were more than forty million. Many television shows in the 1950s stressed homogeneity and conformity and presented an idealized version of American life that was suburban, patriarchal, middle-class, and white. Gender roles were clearly defined: men worked and participated in politics, while women took care of the house and the children. Moreover, TV celebrated capitalism, materialism, and conspicuous consumption. But at the same time, the Cold War inspired some Americans to join organizations dedicated to improving their community and the country. Of

course, these groups were racially and sexually segregated. Men joined the Kiwanis or the Elks. Women participated in a variety of groups. Even children were active in community organizations, such as the Boy Scout and the Girl Scouts.

### **Greenville Today**

In his recent book *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina*, historian Milton Ready refers to contemporary North Carolina as a "modern megastate" (Ready 376). In the late twentieth century, North Carolina's population passed eight million, making it the tenth largest state in the union, and by 2010, the population is likely to pass ten million. Moreover, the Tar Heel state became more ethnically diverse, as large numbers of new immigrants, especially Asians and Hispanics, moved into North Carolina to take advantage of economic opportunities. In 2008, agriculture was still important, but many of the manufacturing jobs that initially contributed to the post-war transformation had left, as manufacturing interests sought lower wages in other states and foreign countries. Some areas in the state, such as the Triangle in the Piedmont, continue to prosper, but other areas, including much of eastern North Carolina, have suffered. In the early 2000s, the poverty rate in some eastern counties topped twenty-five percent.

In general, Greenville and Pitt County continued to prosper in the early 2000s. With a metropolitan population of 175,000 in 2008, Greenville was the tenth largest city in the state, and the largest one with out direct access to a federal interstate. Greenville also remains the Pitt County seat, and thus a political and legal center. Much of the city's and county's success can be attributed to the growth of East Carolina University (25,000 students) and Pitt County Memorial Hospital (6,000 employees). At the same time, though, the benefits of Greenville's success have not been evenly distributed. In 2008, the poverty rate in Pitt County was more than twenty percent. But compared to other parts of eastern North Carolina, Greenville was doing well economically, and with a new dental school for ECU on the horizon, the future looked bright. Much of this success can be attributed to changes initiated in the post-war years. By 2009, the seeds of economic and social change, planted in Greenville and Pitt County in the mid 1900s, had blossomed.