

History of
The Old Chatham Cemetery

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The dead rested in their own land for many years in Pittsylvania County. Pittsylvania, the largest county in the state, was almost completely farmland and every farm had its family graveyard, near enough to the homestead for easy visiting and watchful care.

In 1784 the Court House was built, marking the County Seat. "Pittsylvania Courthouse" was incorporated and a map was drawn of the proposed town. Pittsylvania Courthouse was a boom-town and the population grew rapidly. Lawyers, judges, workers in the Clerk's office, doctors, storekeepers and others began moving into the area. Two storied buildings with wide porches on each floor were erected for offices for the lawyers and three taverns offered temporary room and board, but people who intended living here bought thirty or forty acres of land and continued the custom of private burial grounds.

Deeds show that the town had three names, used interchangeably. 1784, "Pittsylvania Courthouse", 1806, "Competition" because of the controversy over the location of the courthouse, and 1852, "Chatham" for the British statesman, William Pitt, Earl of Chatham. Some settled for "near the courthouse". The Post Office ignored all changes and continued using the "Pittsylvania Courthouse" postmark until 1876 when it was changed to "Chatham".

After the war between the states there was another influx of people with the opening of tobacco markets in Chatham.

Landowners gradually divided their land into building lots along the Lynchburg Road, which became Main Street. These lots were not large enough to include private cemeteries, but the newcomers were young and healthy and if they thought of death at all it was with the assumption that they would be taken back home for burial.

Bodies were returned to their ancestral graveyards when possible and churchyards were utilized, but the young grew old and the need for a public cemetery became acute.

July 14, 1872 twenty-six men met and organized the Chatham Cemetery Company. They elected officers:

President - Richard White
Secretary - E. T. Jones
Treasurer - W. I. Sims
Directors - John Gilmer
 Jesse Hargrave
 R. C. White

Trustee --- L. Scruggs

They applied for a charter, but they did not wait for it. They were nearly all confederate veterans, with a bond that made for quick agreement. They immediately bought 9 acres of land from one of their members, Hutchings Carter and his wife, Eliza Poin-dexter, for \$700. The deed was delivered to the Trustee July 24, 1872.

At the same time the Carters deeded to the School District a 4 acre lot between the cemetery land and Main Street. A forty foot strip of land running across the lot from Main Street to the cemetery was secured for "ingress and egress". The first public school was built on this lot in 1875. George Wilmer was its principal.

The Company had the land surveyed and the section back of the school lot divided into 78 lots in a horseshoe pattern.

It is possible that the Carter family had already designated this area for burial purposes for the first interment recorded is Ada Bennett Carter in 1872. In 1873 the body of Sallie Withers Carter was moved from the Presbyterian churchyard. They are both in the Hutchings Carter lot. Later other bodies with earlier dates were moved from private cemeteries and churchyards.

The charter was granted January 17, 1873 and The Chatham Cemetery Company, Inc. became official.

The lots sold quickly. The Company took care of the roads and walks, but each owner was responsible for his own lot.

Sunday afternoon was generally accepted as the time to visit the cemetery. Families brought flowers, checked on the condition of the graves and visited with the living. People put benches in their lots for resting and comfortable conversation. Children played around the oak trees. They knew every occupant of the graves in

their family lot and their relation to them.

Time passed. Officers changed. Many of the original members were buried in the cemetery they had created. Terms of the charter were forgotten and in 1902 the company lost the charter.

In 1902 a new committee applied for reinstatement of the charter. Three women appear on this committee. They were:

Eliza Patton Gilmer, widow of John Gilmer. When her husband died she rented her home to house the beginning of a struggling school for girls, Chatham Episcopal Institute. The building burned in 1906, but the school, on the same site, is the prestigious school for girls, Chatham Hall.

Nannie Pannill Ballard, wife of Dr. Thomas Edgar Ballard, Daughter of William L. and Maria Bruce Pannill, her grandparents were Bethenia Letcher and David Pannill, also the grandparents of J. E. B. Stuart. They are buried in Chatham Cemetery.

Maude Blake Merchant, came to Chatham with her husband, W. C. N. Merchant, Station Master for the Southern Railroad, in 1891. They came from Stafford County. She was an energetic, public-spirited woman who became President-General of the United Daughter of the Confederacy, 1927-29.

Others signing the petition were: J. Wyatt Whitehead, merchant. Son of Richard Whitehead, Jr. and Eliza Caroline Brown. He married Nannie Eugenia

Tredway and they had ten children. His home was on the site of the present Chatham Elementary School.

Benjamin Stuart White, owned a livery stable. He had six children and built his home on Depot Street. It still stands, next to Chatham Building Supply Company.

J. Hunt Hargrave, manufacturer, banker, philanthropist. Hargrave Military Academy is named for him. He was the son of Jesse and Ruth T. Hargrave. He married Emma Foulks and they lived in the house built by William Tunstall. It is now occupied by his grandson, Hunt Nenon.

Edwin Sidney Reid, banker - He came from Campbell County in 1878 to be assistant to the President, Dr. White, in Chatham Savings Bank. He married Langhorne Scruggs' daughter, Sallie. They had ten children and built the house now owned by Theodore Brunning, Jr. Reid Street was named for him.

John Pride Hunt, merchant - came from Renan. He married Mary (Molly) Tredway from Danville. They had six children. He built the house on the south side of the Presbyterian Church. It is now owned by Mrs. C. H. Hodgin, Jr.

The charter was reinstated April 30, 1903, with the following officers:

President - James Wyatt Whitehead

Secretary - Maude Blake Merchant

Treasurer - Edwin Sidney Reid

After thirty years the need for space was again pressing. The Company bought a sixty foot strip of land from the School District and divided it into

lots which they designated by the letters of the alphabet, from A to Z. The corners of the rectangular cemetery plot, outside of the horseshoe plan, were also utilized. For some unknown reason they were numbered in the 100's.

A wrought iron fence was placed between the cemetery and the school lot, with wide gates across the entrance and exit. (From the beginning the forty-five foot strip of land had been divided into two roads one north and one south of the school lot).

People were still responsible for the care of their lots. Some kept them well, some neglected them and others moved from the community and left their lots to the ravages of nature. The Company took care of the walks and roads and would take care of a lot for a fee.

A rostrum was built in the rear of the cemetery so that speakers could stand above the audience. The bottom was enclosed to hold tools.

Maude Merchant was appointed trustee after the death of Langhorne Scruggs. She deeded the land to the Company and deeds were issued to the owners of the lots. Records of people buried in the lots were checked, researched and completed under the personal care of the president.

All of the new lots were sold in less than ten years and more space was needed. A strip of land south of the horseshoe plan was cleared and divided into lots which were numbered in the 200's. The first person buried in this section was Bessie Richards,

June 8, 1913.

The Chatham Cemetery was growing larger and the Company was growing smaller. For twenty years the Company continued to struggle with the demand for more space and the problems of neglected lots and inadequate financial support.

About 1934 it was suggested that the cemetery was a community project and should be given to the town. They were warned that the town would not accept it unless it was self supporting.

The Company began a vigorous campaign for Perpetual Care, a new idea at the time, under the direction of a committee consisting of:

Irene Vaden Thompson, who came to Chatham in 1902, when her father, Giles Vaden, was elected Treasurer of the County. She married Girard Estis Thompson, a pharmacist from Charlotte County. They had four children and bought the W. B. Shepherd house across the street from the Presbyterian Church. She was a member of the William Pitt Chapter D.A.R. and President of the Chatham Garden Club and particularly concerned about the unkept appearance of the Cemetery.

Langhorne Jones - lawyer, later judge. Grandson of E. T. Jones and J. Wyatt Whitehead, late officers of the Company.
A. H. Camden - educator. He came from Bedford to teach at Hargrave Military Academy. Later became President of the school.

John Pride Hunt - President of the Company

Maude B. Merchant - Secretary

John Hurt Whitehead, banker. Came to Chatham to work in Planters Bank and Trust Company and later became President. He built his home on the corner of Main Street and Whitehead Road. He was treasurer of the Company.

The owner of every lot was contacted and the response was excellent. The money was put in a special fund.

At a Town Council meeting, December 12, 1938, John Pride Hunt and John Hurt Whitehead, representing the Chatham Cemetery Company, Inc., presented 96 names of Chatham citizens requesting the town to accept the cemetery. On a motion by Langhorne Jones, seconded by A. H. Camden, member of the Council, the Council voted to accept the cemetery and The Chatham Cemetery Company, Inc. went out of existence.

The cemetery fund was turned over to the town. The money was invested and is still used in maintaining the cemetery.

In 1940 the School Board sold the school lot to the Board of Supervisors and built a new Elementary School across the street. In 1957 The Supervisors sold the lot to the State for the Armory, including the driveway thus closing the main entrance to the cemetery.

The town created a new entrance on Whitehead Road, extending it to connect with the road north of the

200 burial area. Later a new road was built south of the 200 block and the entrance forked to join it. The south side of the road was cleared for a 300 block of burial area, the last of the land. That, too, has been sold and a new cemetery, "Hillcrest" on Route 832 has been established by the town.

Under the direction of a member of the Town Council, Allene Overbey Hunt (Mrs. John Pride Hunt III), assisted by Blanche Overbey Crews, D.A.R., the cemetery was renamed in 1939 to "Chatham Burial Park". It is not only kept meticulously neat and orderly, but is as beautiful as a garden with flowers, shrubs, and trees.