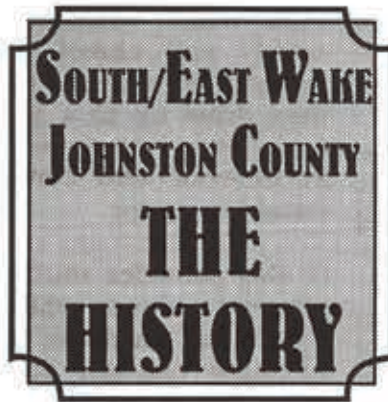


North Carolina's heart and soul

By Liz McGarr

Where the rolling hills of North Carolina's Piedmont smooth into the Coastal Plain is a land of wide fields, dense woods and flowing rivers. The area of Johnston County and southeastern Wake County epitomizes the best of North Carolina. Rural in setting and mood, it is close to the heart of industry and commerce allowing its residents to have the advantages of both urban and country living.



Johnston County was formed from Craven County in 1746. In 1751, the area of Wake County was carved from Johnston.

Johnston was named after the royal governor of North Carolina, Scottish-born Gabriel Johnston who was in office at the time of its formation. It still bears strong traces of English and Scottish attitudes and ways of living even into the 20th century as do many parts of North Carolina.

Gabriel Johnston was one of the five royal governors of North Carolina. His 13 years in office saw an increase in wealth, population and resource development for the state. He served from 1734-1752 and, though a well-educated man, his business sense was apparently lacking: He neglected to collect his salary for the last 13 of his 18 years in office.

Besides bearing the name of a prestigious governor, one of Johnston County's sons became known as "North Carolina's educational governor." Born near Fremont in 1859, Charles Brantley Aycock received his early schooling in Fremont, Wilson, and Kinston, and graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1880. His last year in college he read law and opened an office in Goldsboro after graduation.

In 1900 he campaigned for governor on a platform that primarily pledged an improvement of the public school system. He was unanimously elected and served the state from 1901-1905.

He followed through on his campaign promises. During his 4-year term, the legislature increased its appropriations to the Department of Public Instruction. Training schools for Negro teachers were consolidated to improve the standards. Three colleges were proposed and later established—Appalachian in 1903, Cullowhee, now UNC at Cullowhee, in 1905, and East Carolina Teacher's College, now East Carolina University, in 1907. The system of rural schools was expanded, school enrollment and attendance increased, and teachers' salaries doubled.

Aycock received national attention for his educational efforts. He spoke around the country about his programs. It could be said that he "died with his boots on." He was stricken and passed away on April 4, 1912, while delivering a speech before the Alabama Educational Association.

Johnston County has more claims to fame than just a couple of governors. Benson holds the largest annual gospel sing in the country. Started in 1921, the North Carolina State Singing Convention attracts over 100 groups vying for trophies in front of an audience of more than 50,000 each year.

Ava Gardner was raised in Brogden, a community near Smithfield, and there is a museum there today that holds an Ava Gardner festival every summer.

As you enter Johnston County, you are aware of the richness of the land and its history. Old, by our standards, yet a fresh, new area that many are just now beginning to discover. It is the heart and soul of North Carolina.

