

The History of Wilson County: An Overview

it was not agriculture that brought a dramatic increase in the population. It was the coming of the railroad that brought more settlers. Toward the latter part of 1839, the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad completed the laying of tracks through the area. They established depots at Barden's Depot (Black Creek), Toisnot (Wilson), and Joyner's Depot (Elm City).

As the population increased, Wyatt Moye, state senator from Edgecombe County proposed a bill to the state legislature to incorporate a new town near Toisnot Depot and Hickory Grove. This new community in Edgecombe County was to be named Wilson in honor and memory of Louis Dicken Wilson (1789-1847). Wilson was a prominent politician and military officer who died during the Mexican War. He was considered "the most eminent citizen of Edgecombe County." On 29 January 1849, the town of Wilson was incorporated, with General Joshua Barnes as the first mayor.

Joshua Barnes was noted as the area's leading and most wealthy citizen and was a vocal advocate for the formation of Wilson County. It also should be noted that it was because of his friendship with Louis Dicken Wilson that the town and county was so named. Barnes served as a general in the state militia but saw no military action. Barnes was also an influential advocate for the establishment of formal education within the area and is historically noted as "the father of Wilson County."

The new county of Wilson was formed six years later, but not without controversy. This proposed county was to absorb parts of Edgecombe, Nash, Wayne, and Johnston counties and was widely opposed by the citizens of those counties. An anonymous letter, signed by "Vox Populi" (voice of the people) charged that the supporters of the new county were "misguided men...and demagogues," acting for ulterior motives and selfish reasons. The reality was that the formation of Wilson County was a matter of practicality rather than the greed of a few men. For the residents of the area, long distance travel was necessary in order to conduct business in the surrounding county seats. These county seats were located in the towns of Smithfield, Tarboro, Goldsboro, and Nashville. For this reason, Wilson County was formed on 14 February 1855, although the counties involved ceded just enough portions of their own territories to insure that this new county would remain smaller than the surrounding counties.

Another notable citizen of Wilson County was Alpheus Branch. Branch was the son of a large planter in Halifax County and served with distinction in the Confederate army. In 1865, Branch married Nannie Barnes, daughter of Joshua Barnes and within three years, they had permanently relocated to Wilson. Branch opened a successful mercantile business and in 1872, he joined with Thomas Jefferson Hadley and formed the Branch and Hadley Company. This company would become the Branch Banking Company and eventually one of the largest banks in the southeast, BB&T.

The geography of Wilson County is varied. Wilson County sits roughly on the fall line that separates the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain. Though the majority of the county is level, there are rolling hills in the west which are characteristic of the Piedmont. Traveling in an easterly direction within the county, the geography becomes flat as the land quickly transitions into the Coastal Plain.

There are no major rivers that flow through Wilson County. This may have contributed to the county's slower development, as rivers were thoroughfares for

transportation in the absence of good roads during the early history of North Carolina. Contentea Creek is a large creek that spans the county and is a tributary to the Neuse River. In 1820, there was a proposal to link Contentnea Creek with the Tar River with the construction of a canal. This proposal, however, was not aggressively pursued and never reached fruition.

A major factor affecting the growth of Wilson County was organized mass agriculture. Subsistence farming was replaced with the large production of cash crops. Due to the economics of the time, merchants, investors, and landlords encouraged and sometimes even demanded that farmers plant such crops for increased profits. Between the 1860s and the 1880s, cotton was the primary cash crop. However, because cotton depleted the soil and required expensive fertilization, it became less profitable. Furthermore, surplus in the cotton market and Wilson County's inability to compete with markets in the Deep South made cotton an even less important crop. By the 1880s, however, the face of Wilson County agriculture was forever changed with the demand for flue-cured tobacco.

Wilson County was ideally suited for growing tobacco because its climate and its sandy, loamy soil. By the turn of the century, tobacco had largely replaced cotton as the county's main cash crop. In 1920, Wilson came to be known as the "world's greatest tobacco market." Tobacco continued to be one of the largest industries in the county well into the 20th century.

With the completion of the nationwide interstate highway system after World War II, Wilson County was able to diversify its economy even further. Interstate 95, a major north/south artery on the east coast of the United States, was constructed straight through the heart of the county. Coupled with the interstate and its intersection with US Highway 264, new industries were attracted to the county. Wilson County has developed a diverse industrial base that includes pharmaceuticals, life sciences, automotive parts, and building supplies. Moreover, agriculture still remains an important industry.

As we move into the 21st century, Wilson County has become a major center for commerce, education, culture, and tourism in Eastern North Carolina. It is also thought of as the center for world-famous Eastern Carolina-style pork barbecue. As new development and industry continue to grow within its borders, Wilson County maintains a strong presence in the communities of eastern North Carolina. With its colorful and fascinating history, Wilson County promises to continue as a vibrant community for today and tomorrow.