

Historical Preservation and Development in Chatham County NC

A Guide for Developers

2016

The Chatham County Historical Association, Inc.
*a 501(c)(3) private non-profit corporation whose mission is to preserve and communicate
the history of Chatham County, North Carolina.*

The Chatham County Historical Association (CCHA) is concerned with preserving Chatham County's cultural heritage, which includes historical structures, gravesites, and prehistoric artifacts. Our goal is to work with developers to document and preserve these features of Chatham County's past.



Tobacco barn, Briar Chapel. Preserved on site.

Recognizing *local* history ... In response to concerns about historical properties being lost to development, Chatham County's major subdivision review process has, since 1998, required developers to contact the Chatham County Historical Association (CCHA) when gravesites or structures (i.e., manmade above-ground objects such as houses, barns, sheds, walls, fences, old roads, chimneys, etc.) of greater than 50 years in age or having historical significance are on or within 100 feet on adjacent property.

Contact with CCHA is required before First Plat submittal so that historical features of local significance can be identified early in the planning process. Many such features will seem ordinary and insignificant to casual observers,

but some will have historical significance for Chatham County. There may be few intact examples of a particular type and age of structure, for example, or a structure might

be associated with a particular individual or family that we know something about. After visiting the site, CCHA makes non-binding recommendations to the developer and the planning staff about any features on the property. Our comments are included in notes made available to the Planning Board and available on the subdivision cases page of the Planning Department website at www.chathamnc.org/planning

It is not CCHA's goal to preserve every old structure or artifact on land to be developed. Most often, all we request is access and time to document the historical feature with photographs and notes before it is destroyed. When a structure is to be razed, we sometimes recommend that it be deconstructed so that historical materials can be reused. Many abandoned structures contain flooring, siding, beams, or other materials in good condition. Stone from fieldstone walls or chimneys can also be reused in various ways. Deconstruction can be more cost-effective than demolition alone and some developers have found that future residents are interested in materials that have a historical connection to the site.

On-site preservation might be recommended in unusual cases, such as when a structure is listed, or eligible to be listed, on the National Register of Historic Places, or for a structure that is unique or in particularly good condition but would be difficult to move, such as a log barn. In other cases, we will recommend preserving a structure by moving it to another, appropriate location.



*Chimney, Henderson Place.
Deconstructed and used in
entrance wall.*

Again, our recommendations are just that—recommendations aimed at preserving the history of Chatham County. CCHA cannot require a developer to preserve a structure. Having access to historical features before development begins, however, allows us to document them—saving the history if not the feature itself. It is our hope that if we share what we might know or be able to learn about the site with the developer, local history might become an interesting focal point for future residents.



Log cabin, Brookside at Fieldstone. Deconstructed and moved to new site.

Developers are in a unique position to help preserve Chatham's cultural heritage. Standard development processes, such as title trail research and surveying--which often reveals old roads and fences, cemeteries, wells and foundations--begin the process of documenting local history. CCHA can often assist in documenting the historical background of structures, cemeteries or gravesites, and artifacts, and will appreciate having references to old deeds and plats to identify early owners. Sharing or pooling research results can benefit both the historical association and the developer, for whom knowing the history of the land can prove useful for public relations and marketing.

Disturb not these bones ... *North Carolina statutes protect burial sites*, and county Subdivision Regulations require that such sites be noted on plat maps, along with access routes, as required by law. Cemeteries are generally preserved in place, but developers may request approval from the County Commissioners (or town board if within the Pittsboro, Siler City, or Cary planning jurisdictions) for moving remains to another location.



Fieldstone marker in Kirby cemetery, Chatham Downs.

In 1989 CCHA began collecting information about cemeteries as part of the North Carolina Cemetery Survey. The information produced by this on-going effort serves as the county's official record of burial sites. To date nearly 600 cemeteries – including large church and public cemeteries as well as small family plots – and nearly 30,000 names of people buried in them have been inventoried. Some of these gravesites have been discovered in the course of subdivision surveying. The up-to-date inventory of Chatham County gravesites is publically available on

CemeteryCensus.com. Cemetery locations—some estimated and others confirmed—are available from the cemetery layer of the [Chatham County GIS](#). (Turn on the cemetery layer by checking cemeteries under Tax Parcels

Real Property on the left margin.) These resources can help developers determine whether known or suspected burial sites exist on property to be developed. Developers should also be aware, however, that unreported burial sites might also be discovered during surveying or other development activities. Suspected burial sites discovered should be reported *immediately* to CCHA and to the Planning Office.

Traces of prehistory ... Even more difficult to recognize than fieldstone-marked family graveyards are traces of Native American presence on the land. There is little doubt that native peoples have been present in this area for thousands of years, yet their touch was light. We hope that developers will be sensitive to elusive clues of former peoples and report them to CCHA and to the State Archaeology Office for assessment.

After first plat approval, what then? In preparing for Construction Plan submittal, the developer follows any special conditions that the County Commissioners may require. Follow-up contact should be made with CCHA and planning staff if new information comes to light about structures or gravesites. If structures are to be moved or deconstructed, CCHA is available to photograph and document the process.

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