

History of Caswell County

[Home](#) > [History](#)



Female Tobacco Worker 1940

- **Established 1777**
- **First County Created by the State of North Carolina**
- **Named For State's First Governor, Richard Caswell**
- **Leasburg First County Seat**
- **Yanceyville Current County Seat**
- **Located Northern Piedmont NC**
- **Home of Bright Leaf Tobacco Discovery**

Historical Sketch

Caswell County, North Carolina, was established in **1777**. It was carved from Orange County to make governmental agencies more accessible to the area's residents. Over three hundred men signed the petition submitted in 1771 requesting that the Colonial government at New Bern further partition Orange County. Because Orange County had just recently been subdivided and because matters leading to the Revolution took precedence, no action was taken on this petition. It was not until independence had been declared and the Revolutionary War had begun that Caswell County was created by the first state government. The new county appropriately was named Caswell after **Richard Caswell**, the

first governor of the new State of North Carolina.

Thus began the new county. Governor Caswell had appointed justices of the peace to hold court and to administer the business of the county. The initial organizational meeting was to be the convening of the first court at the house of Thomas Douglas in what would become **Leasburg**, the county's first county seat. There, on June 10, 1777, at the first session of the Caswell County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, the justices of the peace appointed by the governor met to create the government of the county. John Lea was given the honor of opening the first court. Selected at this first session were the clerk of the court (William Moore), the sheriff (David Shelton), the register of deeds (**Archibald Murphey**), and the ranger (John Payne). Among the business conducted by this first court was recognizing the commission from the governor appointing John Graves as Captain and appointing James Saunders as Colonel. The first court session lasted but three days.

It is important to know the names of the men who launched the government of Caswell County in 1777. They were:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James Saunders • John Payne • Thomas Rice • George Moore • James Scarlet • William Moore • John Atkinson • Robert Parks • James Rice • William Hubbard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George Foote • Jeremiah Poston • John Douglas • Thomas Harrison • Robert Dickens • Stephen Moore • John Moore, Jr. • Archibald Murphey • Jesse Benton
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To be remembered is that in 1777 Caswell County included the present-day Caswell County and all of what became, in 1792, Person County. Thus, many of the names on this list have importance for Person County, especially the four Moores shown.

Following is a May 1777 article from *The North Orange Crier* (which also appeared in the 4 May 1977 edition of *The Caswell Messenger*):

May, 1777, from the writings of Joshua Lea, itinerant journalist from Leasburg.

This wandering journalist has recently received word on his journey to **Hillsborough** that the North Carolina General Assembly did on May 9 ratify a document making the northern part of Orange County into a new County, henceforth to be called Caswell. Beginning June 1, all

residents of the area beginning some 12 miles north of **Hillsborough** and laying north to the Virginia line, and lying between Granville County on the east and Guilford County on the west, will consider themselves to be citizens of Caswell County. The new county will run approximately 41 miles from east to west and approximately 21 miles from north to south. It is said that the honorable members of the General Assembly did take pity on the residents of the northern part of Orange County in that the county was so large as to make it extremely difficult for those in the remote northern section to attend to their public duties at **Hillsborough**. Making the northern section of Orange into a separate county should bring some relief to this difficult situation, making it possible for men to properly attend to their affairs and duties at a more accessible location.

It is expected that the center of the government for the new county will be located near the village of Leasburg, as it lies approximately half way between the eastern and western boundaries as they have been named in the law. Official reports are that John Butler, John Lee and James Saunders, Esquire, have been appointed Commissioners and that they will hold responsibility for running the dividing lines according to the law. It is further learned that Justices of the Peace are to be nominated and commissioned for the new County of Caswell and that these Justices are directed to meet on the second Tuesday in June at the house of Thomas Douglas to take their oaths. A poll tax of two shillings is to be layed on each taxable person in Caswell County for a period of two years, these monies to be laid aside for the building of a Courthouse, Prison and Stocks. it will be responsibility of the Sheriff to collect these taxes for that purpose.

When this tired journalist chanced to stop for the night on his return from **Hillsborough**, he heard from the residents in the area of North Hyco Creek that their sympathies are neither for nor against the new county, as the journey to **Hillsborough** is not as difficult for them as for some in northwestern Orange (soon to be Caswell). However, it was learned last month on travels up to the Dan River area that those dwelling in the northernmost part of Orange were eagerly awaiting ratification of the Act, as they dwell in one of the areas lying the most remote from **Hillsborough**. In fact, it is said that some of the folk living along the Dan would be even more pleased if their land were to be taken into Virginia as much of their business is transacted across the Dan!

Neighbors around Leasburg welcome heartily the prospect of conducting official business at a place not far from their homes and the prospect of a better economy which will accompany the setting up of a center of government nearby. It is not really known how the settlers in the western part of this newly formed county will react as they live in such remote areas that this writer has had no contact with them in months. Yours truly may, in fact have to discontinue his journalistic wanderings in this area, as he feels strongly called to take up arms to assist the Revolutionary Forces in the colonies which are gathering to help defend our infant nation whose independence from the Mother Country was officially declared less than one year ago. Perhaps this new venture will provide material for yet another journal.

Just as travel made it difficult to attend court at the county seat of Orange County in **Hillsborough**, many in what became Person County found travel to Leasburg difficult. As a result, in 1792 Caswell County essentially was divided into halves. The western half remained Caswell County; the eastern half became Person County. Leasburg was the county seat of Caswell County for only a few years. With the revised county boundaries, a new county seat was needed more at the geographic center of the county. Leasburg, now near the border with Person County, no longer was a convenient county seat. This resulted in surveyors locating the geographic center of Caswell County. There, at a place called Caswell Courthouse (initially called Caswell New Courthouse), the new seat of county government was created in 1792. This eventually became **Yanceyville**, and was so named

in 1833 in honor of James Yancey (c.1772-1829), brother of **Bartlett Yancey, Jr.**

In September 1777, representatives to the North Carolina legislature were chosen. John Atkinson and John Moore were selected to attend the House of Commons. James Saunders was chosen to attend the Senate. The state government remained centered at New Bern.

Because both Caswell County and the State of North Carolina were created in 1777 there were other matters at hand -- the Revolutionary War. Accordingly, between 1777 and 1783 both county and state had their hands full with fulfilling the terms of the Declaration of Independence. Caswell County contributed significantly in personnel and material to the war effort. However, it was but marginally a site of actual combat. Caswell County natives famous for contributing to the War of Independence are: **Lieutenant Colonel Henry ("Hal") Dixon; Captain John Herndon Graves;** Dr. Lancelot Johnston; and **Starling Gunn.** After the 1781 Battle of Guilford Courthouse, General Cornwallis brought his British forces through Caswell County pursuing that wily General Greene, whose "retreat" probably won the Revolutionary War. This was part of the famous *Race to the Dan*, which was the calculated retreat by General Greene across the Dan River that extended General Cornwallis so far from his source of supply that his fighting power was effectively ended.

Cornwallis is believed to have marched through the Camp Springs area, through Leasburg, and certainly through the **Red House Church** area in Semora, where the grave of Reverend Hugh McAden was disturbed.

After the war ended, a census was taken by the State of North Carolina. It showed Caswell County to be the second most populous county in the state, with 9,839 people. Second, by only 489 people to Halifax County. With the county seat relocated to Caswell Court House (Yanceyville), Leasburg ceased to have significant political importance. However, along with **Milton** in the northeast corner of the county, Leasburg and Yanceyville would be responsible for much of the county's development over the next century.

The period between the turn of the nineteenth century and the Civil War was a golden time for Caswell County, at least if you were a white land owner. Were you a slave, the perspective would be somewhat different. The county continued to grow and prosper. And, around 1830 it began that part of its history now termed the *Boom Era*. This was roughly

from 1830 to when the adverse effects of the Civil War began to be felt in the 1860s. As it remains today, **tobacco** was the leading agricultural product of the county during the antebellum period. The county also saw during this period the development of various mills (flour and lumber), most dependent upon water power. It saw the creation of the Milton Cotton Factory and the furniture output of **Thomas Day**. It saw the **Yarbrough Foundry** and the Yanceyville Silk Company. It saw the discovery in 1839 of Bright Leaf Tobacco in Blanch by Stephen, the slave of Abisha Slade. Fine homes were built in Leasburg, Milton, Yanceyville, Locust Hill, and in other communities throughout the county as the wealth of the tobacco-based economy and those industries supported by tobacco provided the ability to build impressive homes. Academies opened, with such notables as **Solomon Lea** in Leasburg as their head masters.

Caswell County produced many political leaders, including **Bartlett Yancey, Jr.**, **Archibald Debow Murphey**, **Romulus Mitchell Saunders**, **Bedford Brown**, **Calvin Graves**, **John Kerr**, **Jacob Thompson**, and others. At one time it was stated that all successful legislation had to make its way through the Caswell County legislators. As an example, Bartlett Yancey, Jr., was Speaker of the North Carolina Senate 1817-1827, and during part of this time Romulus Mitchell Saunders was Speaker of the North Carolina House of Commons.

These were heady times for Caswell County. However, the course of the county's history was changed in 1861 with the start of the Civil War. The next four years devastated the South, they devastated North Carolina, and they devastated Caswell County. The *Boom Era* was over.

Caswell County's elected leaders in the months leading to the Civil War were against secession. They supported the union and believed the best approach was to take moderate steps to accommodate all points of view, but to keep the Country together. However, they also resented the fact that the federal government was attempting to deprive the states of the right to determine their own destiny within the federal framework. In the end, events beyond Caswell County determined its future as, reluctantly, the State of North Carolina seceded and joined the Confederate States of America. Though reluctant to leave the union, both state and county fought bravely in the Civil War. Caswell County produced the Leasburg Grays, the Milton Blues, and the Yanceyville Grays. Of course the county contributed men to other troops and provided much in the way of supplies and material. To

those brave men a memorial was erected in 1921 on the square in Yanceyville, the **Confederate Monument**. However, when the war ended, those soldiers still able returned home, but it would never be the same. William Powell who wrote the 1977 history of Caswell County sums it up as follows:

Events of the brief span of time between 1861 and 1865 completely changed the course of the history of Caswell County as it did for much of the state and the South. What the effect was of the price paid with the life of so many young men can never be determined, of course. The loss of many thousands of dollars invested in slaves was regarded as significant only briefly; mere dollars were soon forgotten in the face of more pressing concerns. The totally changed pattern of life throughout the country, however, was a different matter. For blacks it meant freedom from the bonds of slavery, a brief period of rejoicing, and then a resumption of a life of hard work. For many whites it meant the abandonment of the familiar plantation life style; for the previously poor small farmer it meant even greater poverty; and for the whole county it meant a reduced standard of living all around, abandoned land, and a public revenue inadequate for the services that governments ordinarily were expected to provide. The character of the county underwent a metamorphosis that perhaps would not have surprised Bedford Brown, **Willie P. Mangum**, or Jonathan Worth had they lived to recognize it; but most people were stunned by what had happened, and they lost the pride and the spirit that had made Caswell a leader among counties for so many years.

The year 1861 saw the start of the Civil War and the completion of the magnificent **Caswell County Courthouse**. The years following the Civil War saw the onset of Reconstruction, the murder of **Senator John W. Stephens** in that same Caswell County Courthouse, and the **Kirk-Holden War**. Reconstruction was a confusing period in the history of Caswell County. Blacks were free and could vote, but they continued to have secondary economic and social status. The conservative whites, out of power for the first time in decades, resorted to the Ku Klux Klan in attempt to regain that power. Principally as a result of events in Caswell County, Governor William W. Holden was impeached and removed from office. It was a sad time for the county and the state.

To say that the county languished between 1870 and 1920 could very well be an

understatement. Using tenant labor and extended families, Caswell County continued its antebellum reliance upon tobacco. Surprisingly, it was one of the few North Carolina counties to emerge immediately after the Civil War with an increased economic output than immediately before the war. But, that was a temporary and aberrational state of affairs. With the continued dependence upon tobacco, the reluctance to diversify agriculturally, the continued abuse of the land, and no reason for the industrial revolution to have an impact, the county continued its slide into poverty. Caswell County could not dig itself out of the economic mire created by the Civil War. It took the Depression of the 1930s with its federal works programs, the trauma of World War II, and the boom years of the 1950s to awaken Caswell County. And, many claim that it remains slumbering today.

The county attracted a few small textile mills in Yanceyville that certainly were important to those who found employment there and they could not but help a tax base that was tied to agriculture. A most-welcome meat packing operation opened in the Matkins community of the county's southwest corner. Leasburg and Milton continued to decay economically, and became bedroom communities to Danville, Durham, and beyond. However, there was no geographic or political reason for Caswell County to be attractive as a site for industry. It had no modern infrastructure and could not generate internally the capital required to build industrial parks and the necessary transportation links. While the land itself has recovered somewhat from the ravages of mismanagement, it appears that the county's most valuable asset may be its past.

A rich heritage wasted? Valuable land devoted to tobacco no matter the cost? The best and brightest lost to other places? Where did Caswell County go wrong? Even today its economy is based upon tobacco, almost one hundred years after many advised it to diversify its agricultural base. The almost opulent Caswell County Courthouse and the mansions sprinkled throughout the county are sources of pride, but they are also reminders that the basis of this pride is almost two-hundred years old. Caswell County's history is worth studying. One can only hope that its future will be as interesting.

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Links

- **Photograph Gallery (1939-1940)**
- **Historical Markers**
- **Caswell County History and Information**
- **County History Overview by CCHA President, Elizabeth McPherson**
- **Caswell County Hookworm Campaign** [fascinating 1913 observations on Caswell County]
- **Tourist Photographs**
- **Caswell County Website**
- **Caswell County Gen Web**
- **National Register of Historic Places**
- **1868 Caswell County School Districts Map**
- **1908 Caswell County Soil Map**
- **1936 Caswell County Highway Map**
- **2008 Caswell County Road Planning Map**
- **Tobacco and Slave Ledger**

The history of Caswell County is long and runs deep. There are many stories to be told. Our goal is to include many of them on this website. The above is just a overview. If you have stories, photographs, anecdotes, or any other materials relating to Caswell County that you would like to contribute, please send them to the **CCHA**.

[Top](#) > [Home](#) > [History](#)

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