

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Dempsey E. Wood (Part 11)

Born and reared in Bucklesberry, Dempsey Eugene Wood (1847-1921) was elected to the State House of Representatives in 1883-1884, his only term of elected office. However, he remained politically active and showed particular interest in farmers' rights to grow their crops.

One of the pressing agricultural issues of the day was damage to crops, including corn, beans, cotton, and wheat, caused by free-roaming animals, as described by K. Todd Johnson:

"Free range for livestock was the common practice in North Carolina and the rest of the South from earliest settlement until the late nineteenth century. To keep livestock—defined as horses, mules, cattle, goats, sheep, and swine—from ruining crops, farmers customarily kept fences around their fields and garden patches. Free range was most beneficial to landless farmers and small landowners who might otherwise be denied access to waterways and woodlands. Soon after the Civil War ended, however, this system came under attack, since building and maintaining zigzagging rail fences around crop fields stripped forests and consumed a great deal of farmers' time and energy." (2006, *NCPedia*)

In short, rather than livestock owners responsibly fencing-in their animals, the burden fell on farmers whose crops were being damaged to fence-out free-roaming animals. During the early years of the State, the practice of free-roaming, a concept that originated in England, was a presumed right for livestock owners, although not rooted in law.

By 1873, representatives from a handful of Piedmont area counties convinced the General Assembly to pass the State's first stock law to stop free roaming. The law eliminated crop fences, required farmers to fence their livestock, and directed local jurisdictions to erect a fence around the boundaries of the county or township.

Legislation was passed for more than 25 additional counties in 1880, with an amendment that allowed individual landowners within townships to implement the stock law even if neighboring farmers in the same township wanted to remain free range.

Dempsey believed the stock law was needed in Bucklesberry and the surrounding community. He joined several others in implementing the law soon after the 1880 amendment and monitored its effects:

1881, April 14: "The 'Stock Law' for Falling Creek township and a portion of Kinston township is now in force—the Committee, Messrs., W. L. Kennedy, Dempsey Wood, Jr., and L[evi]

M[ewborn] Sutton, having had the township fence built and the ten days notice given as required by the Act. We confidently predict a prosperous future for the farmers in this section." (*Kinston Journal*)

1882, March 22: "Mr. Dempsey Wood, Jr. of Lenoir County, informs us that the farmers of Falling Creek township are further advanced by two weeks than those of other sections. Mr. Wood attributes this to the 'no-fence law' in force in that township. While other farmers had to waste time in repairing fences our falling Creek friends worked their lands." (*Goldsboro Messenger*, reprinted in *The Biblical Recorder*, Raleigh)

Dempsey's leadership in the no-fence movement earned him the title, Father of the Stock Law, by Greensboro's *North Carolina Christian Advocate* newspaper in 1902. A final State-wide stock law would not be passed until 1917, directing "the responsibility for maintaining fences to be shifted from citizens in stock law territory to those with free range," according to Mr. Johnson.