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Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Glimpse in Time 1873: Weather

The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) had reached its midpoint in 1873, and the South was continuing its recovery from the Civil War loss. Notable events occurred that year at the national level.

On March 4, 1873, Ulysses S. Grant was sworn in as the nation's 18th President. Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis were awarded a patent on May 20 for a copper rivet used in manufacturing jeans. The Triple Crown's Preakness Stakes saw its first running on May 23. Not to be confused with the Great Depression of 1929-1941, the Long Depression of 1873-1879 was sparked by the New York Stock Market crash on September 18. And the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was founded in Hillsboro, OH on December 23.

Noteworthy events also occurred in North Carolina in 1873. The State gained national attention when James Henry Gatling, a farmer in Hertford County, built the first American airplane that year. After gliding some one hundred feet, the peculiar, hand-powered aircraft crashed when he attempted to fly it. And at a meeting in the Goldsboro Courthouse on May 14, the NC Press Association was established.

Locally, a glimpse of what was happening and relevant to folks in Bucklesberry and La Grange can be gleaned from news that was reported at the time. One of the earliest years in which multiple news outlets wrote about this old community was 1873. Available online and archived issues of three eastern NC newspapers provide brief reports about Bucklesberry: *Gazette* (Kinston); *Goldsboro Messenger*; and *The Wilmington Morning Star*.

The first news report had to do with weather. As a rural farm area, Bucklesberry has always been impacted by weather, in particular, rain, making it a major topic of interest among locals. On February 21, 1873, the Kinston *Gazette* wrote about severe weather that had affected the community: "Freshet—During the past week, and at this writing the Neuse River has been very full, overflowing its banks in many places and preventing people who live on the other side from coming to town..."

Indeed, historical records reveal that the State experienced epic rainfall during the month of February 1873. In an 1892 book titled, *Climatology of North Carolina, 1820-1892*, Dr. H. B. Battle and colleagues reported statistics indicating, "The only year in which the average rainfall for February exceeded 5.70 inches was in February, 1873, when an average of 9.03 inches fell." In addition to impeding travel, the nearly double rainfall precipitation, and inevitable soggy, wet fields would have adversely affected crops and vegetables that had been planted or were growing during that time.

The need for farmers to know the weather was critical back then, just as it is now. Providing forecasts and advanced warning of impending severe weather was one of the chief missions of the NC State Weather Service of the Meteorological Division of the NC Agricultural Experiment Station, cooperating with the US Department of Agriculture Weather Bureau. Operating out of Raleigh in the late 1800s, officials would communicate information by mail, telegraph, and limited phone service to appointed individuals called, displaymen, and other correspondents situated at various stations across the State.

Displaymen were given a set of five color-coded flags to display in their communities that announced the weather, as follows: white flag (clear or fair weather); blue flag (rain or snow); blue and white flag (local rain); black triangular flag (temperature); and a white flag with a centered black square (cold wave).

Combining flags allowed communication of more specific weather forecasts, for example, a white flag with a triangle flag positioned below it would mean clear or fair weather with cooler or cold temperatures. Except Sunday, displaymen would hoist flags daily by 4:00 PM that signaled the weather through 8:00 PM the following day.

In 1891, the NC Weather Service added another 23 display stations at key locations across the State for a total of 51 for using the flag system. The newer stations added were mostly in communities that raised tobacco. Written notices were mailed daily, except Sunday, to over 130 stations so that "forecasts [could be] bulletined for the benefit of the farmer," according to Dr. Battle and colleagues.

Kirby E. Sutton (1866-1930) of Bucklesberry was the La Grange weekly weather crop correspondent in 1891 for the NC Experiment Station of the State Weather Service.