

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Glimpse in Time 1873: Crops

One of the earliest years in which multiple news outlets wrote about Bucklesberry and La Grange was 1873. An online search identified three eastern N.C. newspapers that published brief reports about the community: *Gazette* (Kinston); *Goldsboro Messenger*; and *The Wilmington Morning Star*.

Last week's article focused on a February 21, 1873 news piece from the Kinston *Gazette* that reported on the swollen Neuse River. Old climate records from the late 1800s indeed verified colossal rainfall that had soaked the State that year during the month of February. The average of 9.03 inches of rain that fell that month was truly historic. For the 52 previous years on record, the highest average rainfall for the month of February had never exceeded 5.70 inches.

The *Gazette* stated that the overflowed waters from the Neuse impeded travel for folks who lived on the south side. However, no online newspaper articles could be found that reported how the heavy rainfall may have affected crops during the early days of the planting season.

But journalists wrote about crops as the growing season progressed. Four news briefs published between May and October tracked the growth of the corn and cotton crops in Bucklesberry and La Grange. The first was posted in late spring: "La Grange corn and cotton badly damaged by frost, says the Kinston *Gazette*." (*The Wilmington Morning Star*, May 24)

The possibility that frost could kill healthy plants was a constant worry for farmers. In an 1892 book, *Climatology of North Carolina, 1820-1892*, Dr. H. B. Battle and his colleagues noted that, "The average date of the first killing frost in North Carolina is October 10th...the last killing frosts of spring occur most frequently in April, though some severe frosts have been recorded in May." So, the damaging frost of May 1873 was not unusual.

In the late 1800s, giving advanced notice about severe weather was the job of the N.C. Experiment Station and State Weather Service, in cooperation with the U.S. Weather Bureau in Raleigh. By 1891, two nearby stations received forecasts, frost, or cold wave warnings that could be quickly communicated by telegraph or telephone: Mount Olive (J. A. Westbrook); and Kinston (W. D. Pollock). Although the U.S. Postal Service was slower, Dallas Mifflin Stanton (1847-1913) of La Grange received forecasts and cold wave warnings by mail.

By mid-June, prospects for a good cotton crop were upbeat, but there were concerns about the corn: "The cotton crop in this section is for the most part looking well, and the weather is favorable. The corn crop however, is not so promising." (*Goldsboro Messenger*, June 17)

What appeared to be a promising cotton yield in June turned out to be a devastating loss by the fall of 1873, due to lingering rainfall. Two final news pieces confirmed a greatly diminished cotton crop in Bucklesberry and La Grange:

September 18: "The Kinston *Gazette* learns that the cotton crop in Lenoir County is cut off fully one-third by the recent continued rains. Between the rows the ground is literally covered with the fallen forms." (*Goldsboro Messenger*)

October 10: "The new cotton crop comes into La Grange slowly and the impression, we learn from the *Review*, is that only two-thirds of a crop will be made." (*The Wilmington Morning Star*)

Whether the corn crop recovered by harvest time is uncertain. But these news reports are clear that farmers in Bucklesberry and La Grange took a financial hit with their cotton crop. Since cotton was the primary cash crop, 1873 proved to be a painfully lean year for the local economy.