

HIDDEN HISTORY: THE LOST COMMUNITY BENEATH JORDAN LAKE

WTVD

Heather Leah

Friday, July 27, 2018

Article online with video: <https://abc11.com/amp/community-events/hidden-history-the-lost-community-beneath-jordan-lake/3833588/>



When people take their boats out on the waters of Jordan Lake, they may not realize they're floating above an entire buried community, including homes, farms, foundations and even graveyards.

Sitting in the crook of the New Hope Valley, Jordan Lake is man-made, created in the wake of several flooding disasters. The terrain of the New Hope Valley has always made navigation difficult, and the frequent floods fated the end of many of the farms and surrounding communities.

In the 1950s, the government began acquiring long-standing family homesteads, where generations of North Carolinians grew and hunted food, for the purposes of controlling floods and building the New Hope Dam, which would later create Jordan Lake.



However, because of delays in the project, some homes and buildings sat vacant for decades. In fact, from these abandoned buildings came the decor of some popular Raleigh businesses of the era, including an underground music venue in the Village Subway. Coincidentally, the Village Subway was later sealed beneath the city and forgotten, much like the homesteads rest forgotten beneath the lake.

Many of the abandoned homes -- and even some graves -- were looted. If you were to take a scuba suit and go diving, structural remains would still be visible today, including foundations of homesteads and barns.

A. The New Hope Valley: A divided history

According to Bob Crowley, Curator of History for the North Carolina Railway Museum, the New Hope Valley has historically been the divide between the Eastern and Western parts of North Carolina. Aside from the rough terrain causing danger and difficulty traveling, it was also regularly raided by members of the Tuscarora tribe.

"The 1600s around here were pretty rough," said Crowley. "The New Hope Creek had steep siding. You could ford the Haw or the Cape Fear, but you needed a boat to cross the New Hope."

This made it difficult and expensive for merchants to cross the state with their wares, closing down trade routes between the East and West of the same colony. Land surveyors at the time, including the famous John Lawson, noted in reports the New Hope Creek and Valley were problematic.

"In the pre-Revolutionary days, the government didn't have a highway department. If you wanted a road, you got a permit and you built it yourself," he said.

No one had any reason to spend time or money building a road or bridge across the river until a farmer named Francis Cypert acquired land on both sides of the New Hope. The strain of ferrying his oxen back and forth across the river became too much, and he applied to the colony of North Carolina to build a bridge -- with a toll. He also built a tavern beside the bridge.



Since his bridge was the only way to easily cross, "all the commerce and government had to go over Cypert's bridge, and most stayed at his tavern," said Crowley. In the 1700s, taverns were an important part of the colony's government and trade, as they provided places to stay along the road. The capital of North Carolina was decided by a tavern, only a day's travel from Cypert's -- Isaac Hunter's Tavern.

Today, Cypert's road is still a main thoroughfare. It grew and expanded into Highway 64, which now travels over Jordan Lake. "Cypert's tavern," shares Crowley, "would be underwater now."

B. Lost communities along the riverbank

If you look at the map today, you'll notice familiar names mentioned in this very article. Communities and townlets, some so small they were never officially incorporated, dotted the New Hope Valley and the watery borders of Lake Jordan.

Some are washed away; some are now just a name on a street sign. But you can still drive through a few that are safely on the shore and get a taste of what life is like in the New Hope

Valley. Bonsal, for example, is a unique blend of dilapidated wooden barns and immaculate white 1800s homes from the Old South.

"Out in the woods," Crowley said, "You can probably find old abandoned houses and homesteads."

Crowley begins rattling a list of some of the New Hope Valley's old communities.

"Seaforth," he says, "Is a dot in the middle of the lake today."

"There was also Farrington, the biggest town in the valley. It had a full-sized working saw mill."

"Lane was another one," he says. "And Friendship, which was one of the first integrated communities where even right after the Civil War, black and white people could live as neighbors."

Log Pond -- which later became Apex -- and New Hill were also part of the New Hope Valley.

In 1933, the US Army Corp. of Engineers made a survey, pointing out, like surveyors from the past, that New Hope Creek was problematic. The way it was formed meant it didn't have a good floodplain. When it rained, it would overflow its banks.

But in 1933, North Carolina wasn't yet ready to take on the enormous task of creating a dam that would permanently wash out or alter many of these communities.

C. Hurricane no. 9: The final disaster

"In 1945 Hurricane No. 9 blew across the Atlantic, smacked into Florida, and rolled up Georgia and South Carolina before stalling over North Carolina," said Bob Crowley, Curator of History at the North Carolina Railway Museum. "It was like Noah. For three days it poured down rain. If you go down along the Cape Fear river you can see water marks 8 feet above the ground." It caused over 2 million dollars in damage.

The Army Corp. of Engineers' survey was called to the forefront once again. This time, according to author Heather Leigh Wallace, author of *Images of America: Jordan Lake*, "Senator B. Everett Jordan secured funding for its development in 1963." The project included building a dam that would create a reservoir to prevent future flooding. It was named The New Hope Project.

According to Wallace's book, archeologists were allowed to dig for historic artifacts before the construction began, and multiple items from Native American tribes were pulled from the ground.

The senator was deeply passionate about the project; however, he did not live to see it completed.

"Originally the dam was called New Hope Dam, and it would have been New Hope Lake," Crowley said. "But they re-named it Jordan Lake, in his honor."

D. The forgotten Pea Ridge community

In preparation for building the dam and filling Jordan Lake, the government bought land and homes. The families were well-compensated and moved, according to Crowley, "just about anywhere they wanted to go, within reason." Some people moved across the state to live with other family members; some moved to nearby towns. Quite a few moved to Raleigh.

Families also had the option of excavating family graves and moving the bodies to other cemeteries. However, some of these families had been living on inherited land for generations, burying loved ones in family graveyards on their own land with graves that had rotted away or been left unmarked. It can be assumed that not all bodies were exhumed.

One stretch of land, mentioned in Wallace's historical account, was more deeply affected than the rest. During the course of decades, the Pea Ridge community had built up along Pea Ridge Road, a major thoroughfare through Chatham County. The land there, Wallace writes, was more fertile from years of deposits and flooding. According to Wallace, the farmers along Pea Ridge Road were especially passionate about their land. They tilled and survived the Depression, the rains and floods, and inherited the farms "through blood, sweat, and tears."

When they left their homes, it took time to move all their belongings -- sometimes weeks. People from the Triangle area assumed the homes were abandoned and began exploring and looting the buildings that were left behind. According to Wallace, "many treasures were lost."

As the water rose, trees, foundations, and even Pea Ridge Road disappeared beneath the waves.

E. Jordan Lake today

That's why the stories must be passed down, written, and remembered. Next time you enjoy a sunny day on the lake, remember the families who settled the difficult and dangerous land of the New Hope Valley, and the history that is hidden beneath the waters.

When the dam was completed in 1982, Jordan Lake not only prevented future flooding but also became a recreational location for swimming and boating. North Carolinians born after the dam's construction may never know the stories of the farmers, tribes, and communities that survived in the New Hope Valley for hundreds of years.