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THE CHADBOURN PASSENGER DEPOT  
STATEMENT OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Submitted by

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## THE CHADBOURN PASSENGER DEPOT

Railroads, both a cause and an effect of the Industrial Revolution in North Carolina, entered a golden age in the 1890s, an era that was to last more than a half century. The giant of the iron track created new towns along its path and just as easily destroyed others unfortunately located beyond its right-of-way. It was a time of promise, prosperity, and progress for hundreds of cities, towns, and communities. In rural areas, however, only a few structures still stand as testimony to the early years of the great age of railroading. The passenger depot at Chadbourn symbolizes not only the era of its construction, but the maturation of a small town and the pride of local citizens who, for a brief moment, clutched the brass ring of fame and fortune.

The site of present Chadbourn was served by a railroad as early as 1853, but not until the early 1880s did the genesis of a town appear.<sup>1</sup> The Chadbourn brothers, James H., George, and W. H., who had established a large lumber industry in Wilmington, decided to expand their enterprise into neighboring Columbus County where stood vast timber reserves. They purchased 10,000 acres of forestland south of the Wilmington, Columbia, & Augusta Railroad and erected a two-story sawmill along the tracks at the approximate location of the present passenger depot.<sup>2</sup> In 1882 a feeder railroad was constructed

from the mill to the South Carolina line. Track was later extended northwestward to Boardman in Columbus County and southward to Conway in South Carolina.<sup>3</sup> The lumber business thrived and a village developed around the sawmill. First called Timberville, the name was changed to Chadbourn when it was incorporated in 1883.<sup>4</sup>

Chadbourn, located midway between Wilmington (North Carolina) and Florence (South Carolina) and serving also as a hub of the Chadbourn and Conway Railway (as the north-south line was called), showed promise as a railroad center even before 1900. A large storage yard for freight cars and a small repair shop had been constructed, and sufficient traffic required the full time service of a switch engine.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it was the combination of two events, the arrival of strawberries and railroad consolidation, that initiated a boom period, spurred expansion of facilities, and led to the town's brief flirtation with international fame.

The lumber industry that had given birth to the town diminished sharply after the departure of the Chadbourn family in the early 1890s, but into the void stepped a Columbus County native with a vision.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Addison Brown, on a trip to Louisiana, had observed strawberries flourishing on land recently cleared of natural vegetation. The stump-ridden fields near Chadbourn, where virgin timber once stood, beckoned

as a land of promise. Brown also realized that the harvest season in Columbus County would fall between that of Florida and the Eastern Shore, giving Chadbourn six weeks free of market competition.<sup>7</sup>

Brown promoted his enterprise, which he called the Sunny South Colony, in a widely circulated, Chicago-based magazine, Farm Field and Fireside.<sup>8</sup> The idea of a fortune to be made in strawberry cultivation spread rapidly. Early in 1895 the first of several excursion trains pulled into Chadbourn. Each carried potential investors and those wishing to establish their own farms. More than 250 families came to investigate and some 160 stayed.<sup>9</sup> The Sunny South Colony proved to be an immediate success, but only because railroad consolidation had opened the northern markets.

The Industrial Revolution accelerated the demand for rapid transportation of raw materials and finished products. Railroads provided the fastest means, and huge profits awaited those who controlled the tracks. Corporations soon formed, among which was the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1890s it had acquired hundreds of miles of track in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. In North Carolina the Atlantic Coast Line had purchased the Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta, the Chadbourn and Conway, and the Wilmington & Weldon railroads. When the consolidated Atlantic

Coast Line Railway System was incorporated in 1900, the strawberry fields in the Chadbourn area had direct access to all the lines that connected to the northern markets.<sup>11</sup> The town entered its first, and only, boom era.

Growth of the strawberry industry took on meteoric proportions. From 17,000 crates shipped in 1900, the annual total skyrocketed to 347,000 by 1907. In one day alone, 36,000 crates (1,152,000 quarts) were loaded on 180 rail cars. Chadbourn was dubbed the "Strawberry Capital of the World," a title the townspeople bore proudly for about a decade.<sup>12</sup> Rising prosperity generated a building boom in Chadbourn, and the railroad was flooded with laborers, businessmen, salesmen, merchants, professionals, and thousands of curious tourists wanting to see the strawberry phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Railroad facilities had to be expanded to accommodate the ever increasing traffic flow.

In 1905 the Atlantic Coast Line had constructed a depot on Railroad Street to handle both passengers and freight.<sup>14</sup> Officials had not anticipated the extent of the economic boom that quickly rendered the depot too small to handle both the huge volume of materials and the people demanding passenger service. In 1910 the Atlantic Coast Line built a new passenger depot on what is now Colony Street and moved the old structure nearby to serve as a freight station.<sup>15</sup> The size and

architectural style of the 1910 structure epitomized the pride and success of the railroad industry and the town of Chadbourn, both then enjoying a "golden age."

In the days before automobiles, movie theaters, and other modern diversions, local people treated the arrival and departure of passenger trains as major social events. One observer described the scene:

But in the early days, up until the '20's, it was a social occasion when the passenger train came through. The girls would dress up in their best and meet the train their hearts fluttering with the hope of catching the eye of some possible admirer (or even future husband) among the crew or passengers. The hotels in town would send their runners with a handcar to bring the guests' baggage and they would try to outshout each other, "Brown Hotel," "Wilkes Hotel," "Harrelson Hotel." After the train pulled out, everyone who had a nickle drifted to the drugstore for refreshments.<sup>16</sup>

Within a decade of its construction, the passenger depot stood a silent witness to a serious deterioration in Chadbourn's economic fortunes. A shortage of refrigerated boxcars, the appearance of the strawberry weevil, and the disruption caused by World War I undermined the success of the "Strawberry Capital of the World."<sup>17</sup> The boom was over. Passenger traffic on the railroad dropped steadily, made more dramatic as use of the automobile became increasingly widespread. Stripped of its popular title, Chadbourn nevertheless maintained a dwindling strawberry industry until 1973 but over the years was forced to

turn to tobacco, diversified crops, and then back to lumbering to provide its economic base.<sup>18</sup> While the town never recaptured the halcyon days of the early twentieth century, it did forge a new life for itself. Vital signs of the passenger depot, however, were slowly ebbing away.

The period after 1930 witnessed a virtual transportation revolution in North Carolina. The "Good Roads Movement" of the 1920s accelerated until, on the eve of World War II, the state maintained over 60,000 miles of public roads.<sup>19</sup> Improved highway transportation made possible the development of statewide motor freight and passenger service. Buses carried people to places that railroads could not go, eliminating cumbersome transfers and delays in reaching destinations. Furthermore, Wilmington, which until the early twentieth century had been the largest city in the state and a major reason for passenger traffic through Chadbourn, saw itself eclipsed in size by Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Raleigh.<sup>20</sup> Isolated in its rural setting and out of the mainstream of prosperous growth, the Chadbourn passenger depot stood idly by as the golden age of railroading entered its twilight years. Even sporadic bursts of activity surrounding an annual strawberry festival begun in 1926 and Chadbourn's claim as "Leader of the Border Belt Tobacco Markets" failed to generate enough sustained passenger demand to justify

maintenance and upkeep of the station.<sup>21</sup> In the 1950s, the Atlantic Coast Line sold the depot to a local citizen who converted the facility to storage.<sup>22</sup>

For nearly four decades the aging structure remained in private ownership, during which time deterioration took its toll. In January, 1990, the Chadbourn Revitalization Corporation, chartered in 1983 "to stimulate and promote the revitalization of the town," secured the property by a deed of gift. Plans are to restore the building as a railroad museum, thus perserving a rapidly vanishing part of our heritage.<sup>23</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Wilmington & Manchester Railroad, chartered in 1846, had been completed through Columbus County to the Pee Dee River by 1853. The company ran into financial trouble after the Civil War, and the line was reorganized in 1870 as the Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta Railroad. Wilmington Daily Journal, January 27, 1854; Ann Courtney Ward Little (ed.), Columbus County, North Carolina: Recollections and Records (Whiteville, N.C.: Columbus County Bicentennial Commission, 1980), 344; hereinafter cited as Little, Columbus County; and Richard E. Prince, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad (Salt Lake City: by the author, 1966), 9, 17, hereinafter cited as Prince, Atlantic Coast Line. See also Colton Map of North Carolina, 1861, and Post Route Map of the States of North Carolina and South Carolina, 1896, Map Collection, State Archives, Raleigh. The latter is hereinafter cited as Post Route Map, 1896.

<sup>2</sup>Glenn F. Strole, Chadbourn and Her Sunny South Colony: A Narrative History (Whiteville, N.C.: Chadbourn Sorosis Club, 1965, revised by Columbus County Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 5, hereinafter cited as Strole, Chadbourn; Little, Columbus County, 206; James A. Rogers (ed.), Columbus County, North Carolina, 1946 (Whiteville, N.C.: The News Reporter, 1946), 43, hereinafter cited as Rogers, Columbus County 1946; and William S. Powell (ed.), Dictionary of North Carolina Biography (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, projected series of which three volumes published, 1979-), I, 349, sketch of James Harmon Chadbourn, hereinafter cited as DNCB.

<sup>3</sup>DNCB, I, 349; and Prince, Atlantic Coast Line, 17.

<sup>4</sup>Strole, Chadbourn, 5, 7; and Little, Columbus County, 205-206.

<sup>5</sup>Strole, Chadbourn, 6; and Prince, Atlantic Coast Line, 17.

<sup>6</sup>After a freight car accident lost equipment for converting the sawmill into a textile factory, the Chadbourns moved back to Wilmington. Strole, Chadbourn, 8. The man with a vision was Joseph A. Brown (b. 1862), who was reared near Whiteville. He became a local businessman in Chadbourn, a town official, and a member of the state legislature for seven terms. Strole, Chadbourn, 10-11; Rogers, Columbus County 1946, 47-48; and John L. Cheney, Jr. (ed.), North Carolina Government 1585-1979: A Narrative and Statistical History (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of

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<sup>19</sup>Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina, 650-651.

<sup>20</sup>See rural and urban population statistics in Cheney, N.C. Government, 1136, 1155, 1204, 1219, 1298. See also Lefler and Newsome, North Carolina, 512, 716.

<sup>21</sup>The State, Volume IX, Number 41 (March, 1942), 16.

<sup>22</sup>Yates interview.

<sup>23</sup>Chadbourn Depot-Application File, Office of the director of the Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; and Yates interview.