

# Opening Windows onto Antebellum North Carolina

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From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 50:1 (fall 2010).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

Imagine for a minute that you have been hired to write a chapter for a North Carolina history textbook of the future. What kinds of things would you write about to explain what your daily experience in 2010 was like? What kinds of places might best represent life in the Tar Heel State today? Look around the landscape. Perhaps you would write about supermarkets, gas stations, or big stores like Walmart, for example. What objects might give future students information about life in 2010? Maybe it would be important to describe cell phones, computers, or televisions. What do you have in your bedroom or closet? What work do you do around home or in school? What forms of transportation do you use most often? How do you have fun? Is there one way to describe daily life for everybody in 2010, or do we need to consider different factors—such as whether you live in a big city, in the suburbs, or on a farm?



Now think about other ways that those textbook readers might learn about your life. What sources of information would be important for them to study? Do you write letters, keep a diary, or send instant messages? Do you have a Facebook page? Do you save receipts when you go shopping or take a lot of photos? What would future museum curators need to collect to tell the story of today’s North Carolina? If your house or apartment building is ever preserved as a museum, what kinds of information might it reveal? If your home has a walk-in closet or a television room, for example, what do those ways of organizing space tell us about family life and consumer society in 2010?

*Details such as windows ordered from England demonstrated wealth in the 1800s. This window belongs to the Bennehan House at Historic Stagville State Historic Site. Image courtesy of Marcia Loudon.*

This issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* gives you the chance to ask some of these same questions about daily life in antebellum North Carolina. The word *antebellum* actually means “before the war.” Historians often describe the time from about the 1820s through the start of the Civil War in 1861 as the antebellum era—a time when politics, westward expansion, and economic and social change set the stage for conflict. Your history textbook may describe these years by focusing on such issues as the debate over slavery, the transportation revolution, the expansion of the cotton economy, the Cherokee Removal, or reform

movements in education, politics, and other areas. These important events helped define this distinctive era.

Think about other ways of telling the story of the antebellum years. The North Carolina landscape of that time did not look the same as our landscape in 2010, and Tar Heels' responses to some of the questions you just answered would be very different. Consider heading out of your classroom to explore important surviving elements of antebellum days. Together, the articles in this magazine open a window on diverse experiences in an era of important economic and social change. How can we combine information gained from buildings and landscapes with what we discover from other historical sources, like documents, to learn about people's lives?

The 1800s got off to a slow start in the state. Faced with exhausted farmland, poor transportation and education, and other challenges to opportunity, thousands of Tar Heels simply left. But North Carolina experienced a building boom in the 1840s and 1850s that began to make it a very different place. Construction of railroads and turnpikes, industrialization, and expansion of commercial agriculture contributed to this boom, which remade the state in highly visible ways. According to North Carolina architectural historian Catherine Bishir, "This was a period of such effective and widespread rebuilding that from these years, as from none before, buildings have endured by the hundreds to the present day." The boom improved and expanded existing buildings and produced new kinds of structures, too. County seats constructed grand new courthouses to fit expanding business, and growing religious groups needed new buildings, too. For some wealthier Tar Heels, larger houses with dining rooms and parlors—in popular new design styles such as Greek Revival or Italianate—replaced one- or two-room log houses.



*The birthplace of Zebulon B. Vance, shown here in a photography from the late 1800s, offers an example of early antebellum life in the Mountain region. Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

Pay particular attention to the ways that buildings themselves provide evidence of everyday experience that may not be clear from documentary (or written) sources alone. For example, according to the 1860 United States census, 80-year-old Rebecca Everett lived with a young woman, the woman's two-year-old son, and 12 enslaved people at a family farm in Edgecombe County. Today you can tour the small three-room house where Rebecca and other members of her household lived, worked, and interacted. If you consider evidence from the census in combination with architectural evidence from the house, does it change your thinking? What does family life in a three-room house suggest about opportunities for

privacy? We might ask some of these same questions about the enslaved residents of Stagville, a site in modern-day Durham County where four two-story slave quarters survive. How were such small dwellings used by the many enslaved African Americans who worked on the plantation as farm laborers, carpenters, weavers, blacksmiths, cooks, or gardeners?

Where people lived in the antebellum era also influenced their everyday lives in important ways. Consider how slave housing at Stagville and at the Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington documents various kinds of work and social life. How might life as an enslaved worker on a large plantation compare to such a person's life in a city? Location mattered in other ways. Most North Carolinians were involved in farming, and region influenced the type of crops grown on a farm—cotton, bright-leaf tobacco, corn, and wheat, to name a few. Prosperity on the farm affected prosperity of the surrounding community. Thomas Day's cabinetmaking business boomed with the growth of commercial tobacco farming in the Caswell County area. In 1853 Day—a free man of color—participated in the Industrial Revolution just starting to take hold in the state. He bought a steam-powered engine to increase his busy shop's production. Wealthier families' homes, like the Bellamy Mansion, can reflect changes in technology during the 1800s, too. Articles in this magazine also suggest some of the ways that children received an education in the antebellum years—learning a trade as an apprentice, learning farming or domestic skills from a parent, or attending a new school like the Burwell School. Girls and boys often received different kinds of training for the distinct kinds of roles society expected them to play as adults.



*Sites like the Everett House in Tarboro (right), Edgecombe County, and the Burwell School in Hillsborough (left), Orange County, have stories to tell about life in North Carolina during the antebellum years. Image courtesy of Monika S. Fleming and of the Historic Hillsborough Commission.*

Keep in mind that not everything built during the antebellum period has survived. In many cases, the buildings that remain represent the best, most stylish, or sturdiest examples of the building boom. Small (or yeoman) farmers—who owned an average of 100 acres of land and a few or no enslaved workers—vastly outnumbered richer plantation owners in North Carolina. Far less evidence of yeoman life exists, however. In some cases, only parts of an antebellum landscape survive. On a large farm site, perhaps the main house remains, while the barn, corncrib, loom house, and slave dwellings have disappeared. Some sites have undergone a lot of reconstruction or restoration, while others remain largely as they were over

150 years ago. And some aspects of antebellum material life can be studied mainly through archaeology. Thus, you will not find a complete overview of the era in this issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian*.

There are many more buildings and landscapes we might have included. As historian Bishir noted, hundreds of antebellum sites survive. Try to visit and study one in your own community. How does it fit the history of the 1800s presented in your textbook? Can you apply what you learned from your book to understand the site and the society that built it? Once you have explored historic sites described in this magazine or located in your area, try rewriting your textbook's chapter on the antebellum era. What new information would you include? What else would you like to know? Considering a wide range of sources can help you learn to recognize and appreciate the evidence of the past that exists all around you.

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