



BEN FRANKLIN SOCIETY
www.BenFranklinSocietyNC.org

Colonial Hearth Day

October 26, 2012

Peggy McGhee's Farm

339 Long Mill Road

Franklinton, North Carolina



“Hearth of the County”

by Marion Blackburn

BEN FRANKLIN SOCIETY Project Perspective

A visit to a farm house deep in rural Franklin County gave school kids a look at colonial life hundreds of years ago. The Colonial Hearth field trip and farm visit served the long-term vision of the nonprofit Ben Franklin Society, the event's sponsor, to spotlight and promote the county's history and natural resources.

The apple turned as the child spun the peeler's handle, rotating it and leaving a red spiral behind. The simple action captivated the small crowd gathered to watch. As the peel unraveled, the kids couldn't wait to grab and taste it. For the moment, the fruit became more interesting than a video game or TV show.

Pared down experiences like stirring clothes in water or hammering a nail proved irresistible to the one-hundred children who visited Peggy McGhee's farm during the first Colonial Hearth Day in October 2012.

The field trip was organized by the Ben Franklin Society of Franklin County with support from the United Way of Franklin County, Novozymes North America and the Franklin County Schools.



While most people consider school children a tough audience, the visit to McGhee's farm proved so interesting that no one missed electronics, computers or chairs as they stopped to watch the activities at each of 12 demonstration sites, with a picnic lunch on the grass. Life hundreds of years ago had unexpected appeal for the kids, who found making - instead of buying - what you needed could be an adventure.



That's just the message organizers hoped kids would take home after Colonial Hearth Day. For them, it was worth the hours of planning to know they made a difference. "By all accounts it was successful," McGhee said. "History is my hobby. I've been thinking about this a long time."

Franklin County

For Colonial Hearth Day, fourth-graders from Franklinton Elementary visited 12 tent stations to see traditional crafts such as soap making and beekeeping. They even participated in some, such as washing clothes in a tub. Inside McGhee's detached log kitchen, they smelled fresh soup being cooked over a fire.



The event, staffed by volunteers, took careful planning to make sure the children were engaged. It provided a break from traditional classroom learning but also advanced the state's requirement that fourth-graders study North Carolina history. As

they walked around the meadow in front of McGhee's home, volunteers in period costumes showed them quilt making, blacksmithing and even a real-life musket firing.

"You didn't just go to a store and buy things," said Diane Schaaf, who along with Fannie Brown, Jo Ann Waterman and Mary Lou Smith staffed a tent about needlework. "If you wanted a sweater in winter, you'd have to knit it."

The event showed kids the often overlooked history of their home. Franklin County took shape in 1779, while the American Revolutionary War was taking place in the countryside of the Thirteen Colonies. Located in the northeastern third of the state, it was more highly populated than areas west. Its county seat reflects its revolutionary origins - Louisburg is named for the French King Louis XVI who reigned at the time and who served as an American ally. The Tar River provided abundant water for the settlers, just as it did for thousands of acres of traditional farmland still located (and operating) in the county. Indeed, it was formerly a central transportation link for timber, textile and agricultural production. Dense clay and rolling hills create a distinctive landscape.

The Ben Franklin Society took its name from the iconic inventor and statesman, as did the county. It aims to honor Franklin's legacy by encouraging collaborative research and educational projects. As George Washington was the acknowledged military leader of the Revolution, Franklin was the inventive intellectual of the times. The society operates as a nonprofit membership organization founded in 2008. Bob Radcliffe is founder and chairman of its eight-member board of directors.

A civil engineer and former Penn State University instructor, Radcliffe came to Franklin County about 15 years ago from Philadelphia. In his new home, he saw great potential in the history, agricultural heritage and stunning natural setting. These assets can attract investment and tourism to the largely rural county, he believes and so he set out to develop a conduit to advance them. The Ben Franklin Society promotes regional development based on these assets. Projects like the Colonial Hearth Day serve that goal.

“We’re a very rural county, and the Ben Franklin Society can help attract people to visit here,” he said. “To ride bicycles, to have road races – anything that’s recreational, we’ve got the space. This is a future.” He envisions projects focusing on local crafts and open spaces. Toward that goal, he has begun an inventory of grist mill sites in the county that could become a mapped bike tour, for instance.

“Franklin County could be a recreational oasis,” he said. Ben Franklin Society events include fundraisers, such as the dining and entertainment events hosted by Franklin BreadWorks, an enterprise Radcliffe began as a fundraiser for the society. Both are headquartered at Radcliffe’s Lynch Creek Farm where an authentic log cabin serves as the society’s headquarters and picnic grounds. Society membership is \$5 and BreadWorks events are for members only. The society received United Way funding to help carry out the Colonial Hearth Day field trip. Sponsorship also came from Novozymes North America, with corporate offices in Franklinton.

First Project

Colonial Hearth Day 2012 will serve as a prototype for the future, Radcliffe said. He would like all county fourth-graders to visit to McGhee’s farm each year. It’s hard to imagine a better match for the state’s teaching requirements for its fourth-graders, which include making sure kids understand its colonial heritage and ethnic traditions. In addition, the state wants school kids to understand regional resources and differences.

Its imaginative approach wove lessons and historic material into the needlework demonstration, where handmade quilts featured symbols used by the former slaves traveling north on secret routes known as the Underground Railroad. “Monkey wrench,” “wagon wheel” “sail boats” and even “log cabin” icons used by slaves to find their way to safe homes and towns were among the images.

“Kids are creative,” Smith said. “They are able to go outside the box. They question and aren’t afraid to try things.” McGhee hoped to reach that natural curiosity when she envisioned the project. A

long-time educator and former schools superintendent, she spent about a year planning the event. “I’ve been thinking about it a long time,” she said.

That combination of curiosity and daring drew kids to the blacksmith area, where Scott (Peggy’s son) and Connor (her grandson) McGhee fired and shaped metal to create hooks for each classroom. Scott McGhee works professionally as a bladesmith, giving demonstrations and showing his knives nationally. The fire heats the metal to about 2,400 degrees F, turning it bright orange. Scott then positioned it on the anvil, a large metal block, and struck it with his hammer to shape it into a point.



Nearby, kids saw wood working with Barny Bernard. A cedar wood smell gave the group a real sense of the woodworking world. They watched Bernard saw and nail the wood, reminding them that in the colonial world, even a simple box was handmade.



A few feet away, Diane Hoyle and Sarah Hagwood warmed animal tallow, or melted fat, along with lye to create authentic soap. Within view were the Native American tent, where kids learned about life before the European colonization, and the merchant’s tent. Man-

ning the merchant’s tent was Bill Rainey, who described the complex travels required to get tools and consumer goods to the colonies – which in return sent cotton, tobacco and other crops back to England.

With his reenactment-worthy uniform and regulation, crown-issue British Brown Bess



musket, Charles Powell explained to his rapt audience that he was a lucky soldier, since he had a blanket. After all, the troops could expect to be in winter camp

through the cold snowy months but supplies were thin. His role as a British soldier meant he reflected the crown's perspective – the colonies were causing trouble by rebelling against the throne.

“Great Britain rules the world,” he said in character to the kids. Later he observes that his attention to authentic detail helps them understand how soldiers lived and gave them a sample of the real world behind the timeline.

Meanwhile, in the cozy log kitchen beside McGhee's home, Jeanne Faulkner plays period music on the hammer dulcimer. Music was a vital part of colonial life, she explains. Settlers carried very little – and usually only essentials for survival. They could carry songs, however, without adding to their physical burden.



Music served as a constant connection to home for the settlers, reminding them of the beloved people and places they left behind. What's more, she said, they chronicled their daily

lives the New World with songs such as “Erie Canal” and “Sweet Betsy from Pike.” “Music was an integral part of colonial life,” Faulkner said. “People could not bring many belongings, but in their mind, they brought the music of their native land. The music, the songs, the ballads sustained them.”

Nearby, a fire kept the room warm despite the autumn chill outside. Savory aromas escaped the hearty soup cooking over it. The large brick hearth created a sense of comfort for the kids, as it would have for colonial settlers many centuries ago. Then, as now, the hearth is the home.

Student Comments

“This was one of the best trips I've ever experienced.”

“My favorite part of your awesome farm was the kitchen. I liked it because I actually saw the way the colonial time settlers lived. It was so cool.”

“I love colonial times living. I think I could live back then, only if I was the hunter of the tribe. I would love if I could come back and spend another day there.”

“So much information, I just loved learning it all.”

The Ben Franklin Society started in 2008 as a non-profit agency dedicated to recognizing and advocating for the resources of Franklin County. Projects are independent of each other but in general serve the public through education and historical awareness. The society serves Benjamin Franklin's own ideal to finding practice solutions to real problems.

Membership starts at \$5, with no charge for students and ranges to \$100 for corporate membership. Members receive quarterly updates and can bring guests to dining and music events hosted by Franklin Bread-Works. Meetings take place at Lynch Creek Farm in Kittrell.

Projects receive funding from the Ben Franklin Society, which as a 501 (c)(3) pursues grants on behalf of worthy project proposals.

For more information visit www.BenFranklinSocietyNC.org

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