

Hey, past: Meet the future

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WENTWORTH — A new program started by the State Library of North Carolina preserves key pieces of Rockingham County's past for researchers of the future, and at the same time it makes local history more accessible to people living in the here and now.

The 2-year-old N.C. Digital Heritage Center recently added more than 100 vintage photos of Rockingham County landmarks, people and historical events, all accessible online with a few clicks of a mouse.

Anybody can now download classic photos ranging from shots of the disastrous Avalon Mill fire of June 1911 to urban street scenes from the 1950s and landmarks such as the old county jail and Reidsville's opera house.

"The library at Rockingham Community College has a really great local history collection," said Nick Graham, coordinator of the statewide program based at UNC-Chapel Hill. "That's something I wasn't aware of until I heard from them about making (the photos) available."

The heritage-center display also features old-time postcards and a few advertising or business cards.

All will be maintained online so that years into the future, historical researchers and others can get an accurate impression of everyday life, Graham said. "We want to stay online for as long as people find it helpful."

The photos resonate with researchers and regular folks because they are "a representative sample that shows different aspects of the county," said Mary Gomez, technical services librarian at RCC's Gerald B. James Library. She worked on the project with Graham.

"We haven't gotten a lot of feedback yet because it's still relatively new," she said. "But we think it's a great way for people to get some perspective on Rockingham County history."



courtesy/Rockingham Community College

Dr. Sam Buck Ellington (with mule) stands in front of the old Rockingham County jail (left), built in 1858 and demolished in 1910, and the Thomas Anderson Ratliffe store (right), later Garfield Wilson's Wentworth Mercantile Co.

Check out the past

To see vintage images of Rockingham County, visit the N.C. Digital Heritage collection online at <http://digitalnc.org>, select the "counties" option and click on Rockingham County on the map. Some of the photos also are on view on RCC's website, www.rockinghamcc.edu/library.

Photos include prominent historical people with Rockingham County ties, such as 19th-century N.C. Supreme Court justice Thomas Settle Jr. There are photos of bygone town baseball teams and numerous long-vanished textile mills and tobacco plants, including the doomed Avalon facility victimized by a fire that also caused the demise of the mill town that grew up around it not far from present-day Mayodan.

Other photos just speak to a particular time and place, such as the rickety-looking grocery store on Jackson Street in Reidsville adorned with an over-size "Double Cola" sign.

Clicking on each thumbnail photo in the online gallery results in a close-up version of that photo along with the option to click on related photos. Bringing up the Avalon Mill fire, for example, also retrieves links to photos in the digital collection of the North Carolina textile-industry and of fires across the state.

Graham said the statewide digital project got under way in late 2009, and so far about 30 counties have added vintage photo collections. The site also features school yearbooks from North Carolina colleges and universities going back to the late 19th century as well as newspapers, both of which are popular sources for people doing genealogical research, he said.

Someone who wants to copy a Rockingham County photo for his or her personal use can download it with no strings, Gomez said. But for commercial use — in a book, for example — the publisher would need to get a written release from RCC, she said.

The idea behind the state's digital history center is to make the material readily available to the average person in a way that the original, carefully stored photos never could be, Graham said.

The state library started the effort because many custodians of historical photos, newspapers and other artifacts do not have the money to digitize them for display online, he said.

Graham said his program handles the technical end of digitizing the photos but relies heavily on local schools and history buffs for the background information that accompanies each photo.

"We can get the material online, but the folks at the local level are the real content experts," he said.

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