

How Green Level got its name

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Do you ever wonder how places get their names? “Apex” was the “apex” of the grade of the Chatham Railroad.

“Friendship” was the result of a traditional Native American pow-wow in which black people, white people, and brown people agreed to live in peace. Olive Chapel was a Baptist church named in honor of its founder, Johnson Olive, who also just happened to be the father of Apex’s first mayor, Henry Calvin Olive.



How about Green Level? How did this community get its name? I’ll give you two hints: “green” and “level.” The area featured a grassy area that was level—the perfect place to graze livestock. And, it was located about one days ride from Raleigh, which is important because ...

Chatham County and the general region west of Wake County were settled long before most of western Wake County. When cattlemen from these points west drove their livestock to the market in Raleigh, they needed a place to rest, feed, and fatten their herd.

One popular place was the “green level” along the Pittsboro Stagecoach Road which ran from Pittsboro to Raleigh. In addition to the “green level” for the cattle, there was the Old Whiskey Tavern to provide food, drink, and lodging for the cattlemen. (Other cattlemen chose the green grass and the protective oak trees of the Salem community, which had the additional benefit of being only a few hundred yards north of a very reliable watering hole known as Log Pond. Years later this pond would water the steam engines at the Apex Depot and give birth to our town.)

When I was growing up in the 50s and 60s, stories of these cattle drives were still being told in the Green Level and Salem communities; perhaps they still are. The cattle drives began at least as far back as the early 19th century.

Another interesting thing about Green Level is the way the churches were formed. Let’s start with Green Level Baptist Church.

The year was 1870 and the people of western Wake County were having transportation issues. They could not afford what had been, before the war, their primary means of transportation: a horse. There were two reasons for this. One is that that most of the South's resources, including able-bodied men, were spent on fighting the Civil War. The other is that, in the spring of 1865, Sherman's army paid a visit to western Wake County and took or destroyed everything else: livestock, hams, bacon, corn, cotton, and silver ware.

Two of the strongest churches in antebellum Wake County had been conveniently located a short ride from Green Level: Salem Baptist to the east and south, and Mt Pisgah Baptist to the north and west. Most Green Level families were members of one of these churches.

After the war, however, there were no horses, so about a dozen families decided to explore the possibility of forming a new church in Green Level. Their plan was to begin by organizing a Sunday school. They needed a place to meet, and there was only one building in the community that could house a group of this size: the Old Whiskey Tavern.

After meeting for some time for Sunday school in the tavern, the group decided to hold a revival. Once again, the Old Whiskey Tavern provided just the right venue. The revival proved so successful that the young community decided to form a church.

The Providence Church, as it was called in those days, met for about two years in the tavern, then collaborated with the local masons to build a Masonic Lodge that would house the church on the first floor and the masons on the second. The two groups shared this building into the early years of the 20th century, then Green Level Baptist, as the church was now called, built its own building.

At the same time that Green Level's white citizens were organizing a Baptist church in a tavern, her black citizens were organizing churches in another unique venue known as brush arbors. A brush arbor is an open-air structure featuring vertical pine log poles holding up a roof made of pine branches. Many local churches started under brush arbors because they could not afford a more permanent structure. And not just local: brush arbors were a popular architectural design throughout 19th and early 20th century America.

Despite the poverty of the era, this was an exciting time for local African-Americans who had just been freed from slavery. For the first time they were allowed to form their own churches, where they thanked God for delivering them from the "Egypt" of their captivity. Many, perhaps most, of the African-American churches in western Wake County were formed just after the end of the Civil War. White Oak Baptist was located in Green Level, and New Hope Missionary Baptist was located three miles northwest.

The founding pastor of New Hope was Elder George Washington Perry. For its first

50 years the church met in makeshift structures such as brush arbors, but in the 1920s it built its own building.

The founders of New Hope Missionary Baptist were two sisters, Josephine and Caroline Williams. In the summer of 1866, Josephine began teaching a Sunday school class under a brush arbor. As the church coalesced into a strong community, they called Elder Calvin Hackney to be their first (male!) pastor and they built a permanent meetinghouse on land donated by Caroline.

So, what is Green Level? If you ask a newcomer to the Apex area, they'll tell you that Green Level is a thriving bedroom community for the Research Triangle Park. If you ask me, I'll remember it as a thriving farming community—that's where I spent my summers as a boy, working on George Beavers' tobacco farm.

But if we could go back to the days before the Civil War, we'd discover something completely different: a tiny cow town, not at all what we generally associate with the "East." It was more like some watering hole along the Chisholm Trail, right out of the Old West. No farms, no fences. Just cattle drives and cowboys, taverns and whiskey, brush arbors and—at least prior to the Civil War—horses!

Warren and Toby Holleman are authors of Pluck, Perseverance, and Paint: Apex, North Carolina: Beginnings to 1941, which traces the history of Apex and surrounding rural communities such as Green Level, Olive Chapel, Friendship, and Salem. Warren and Toby can be reached at www.apexhistory.org. Copies are available at The Rusty Bucket in historic downtown Apex.