Radio Broadcasting - Part 1: NC's 1st radio stations **[1]**

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Radio Broadcasting

by Philip McFee and Wiley J. Williams, 2006

See also: Durham Life Insurance Company [2]; Jefferson-Pilot Corporation [3].

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Radio broadcasting, since its inception in the early twentieth century, has brought an ever-changing variety of programming into the homes of North Carolinians. Growing from amateur rigs on kitchen tables to 1,000-foot towers within just a few decades, radio has evolved from a niche industry into a thriving business with substantial impact on social and economic life. Broadcasting, once the pet project of like-minded businessmen, became a source of entertainment in the prewar era, a catalyst for social change during the civil rights movement [8], and a lucrative business network in the commercial push of the late 1990s. From amplitude modulation (AM) to frequency modulation (FM) to the Internet, radio has shaped and steered the state for almost 100 years.

North Carolina's First Radio Stations

North Carolina radio began in 1920 with the partnership of Fred W. Laxton of General Electric, Frank L. Bunker of Westinghouse Electric, and Earle J. Gluck with the Charlotte [9] office of Southern Bell; all three were trained in electronics and wished to launch the new technology in the state. Using various rooms of Laxton's house and a receiver in a former chicken coop, these pioneers broadcast their amateur signal to an extremely limited range of potential listeners. In 1921, via the U.S. Department of Commerce, they secured the call letters "4 XD" under an "experimental" license. With a commercial license and a new location-the eigthth floor of the Independence Building [10] in downtown Charlotte-the trio signed on WBT [11] radio in April 1922, broadcasting four hours a day with a 100-watt signal.

Also in 1922 a noncommercial station, WLAC 600 AM, went on the air from North Carolina State College [12] in Raleigh-the culmination of a joint project by engineering students and professors. It shut down in less than a year, but WBT continued to prosper. Selling radio parts under the moniker of the Southern Radio Corporation, the Charlotte station's founders secured the future "Colossus of the Carolinas" a lasting place on the dial. Not long after the birth of commercial radio, however, corporate broadcasters began scrambling to tap into the newfound commercial options. Fledgling networks such as NBC and CBS began calling for government protection of the airwaves, and as a result many small stations opted for the security and additional programming of the larger corporations. WBT joined CBS in 1929, which, by 1933, increased its power to 50,000 watts, the legal limit at the time. WPTF-whose call letters stood for "We Protect the Family," the motto of the station's owner, the Durham Life Insurance Company [2]-joined NBC only five years after its small-scale commercial launch as WFBQ. Becoming part of the larger networks gave the stations increased financial security, particularly in the 1930s, when the twin blows of the Great Depression [13] and the Communications Act of 1934 [14]-which threw noncommercial stations off the AM band in exchange for mild cooperation by larger entities-crippled a number of smaller broadcasters.

Keep reading >>Radio Broadcasting- Part 2: Radio Enters Its "Golden Age" in North Carolina [4]

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