

## Education and Literacy in Edgecombe County, 1810 <sup>[1]</sup>

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*Jeremiah Battle, a doctor in Edgecombe County, wrote this report of education in his county in 1810, probably as a letter to a friend. It was reprinted in the UNC University Magazine in 1861.*

*In his report, Battle complains about the lack of education in Edgecombe County — basic literacy and general education, as well as the lack of educated professionals such as doctors and lawyers.*

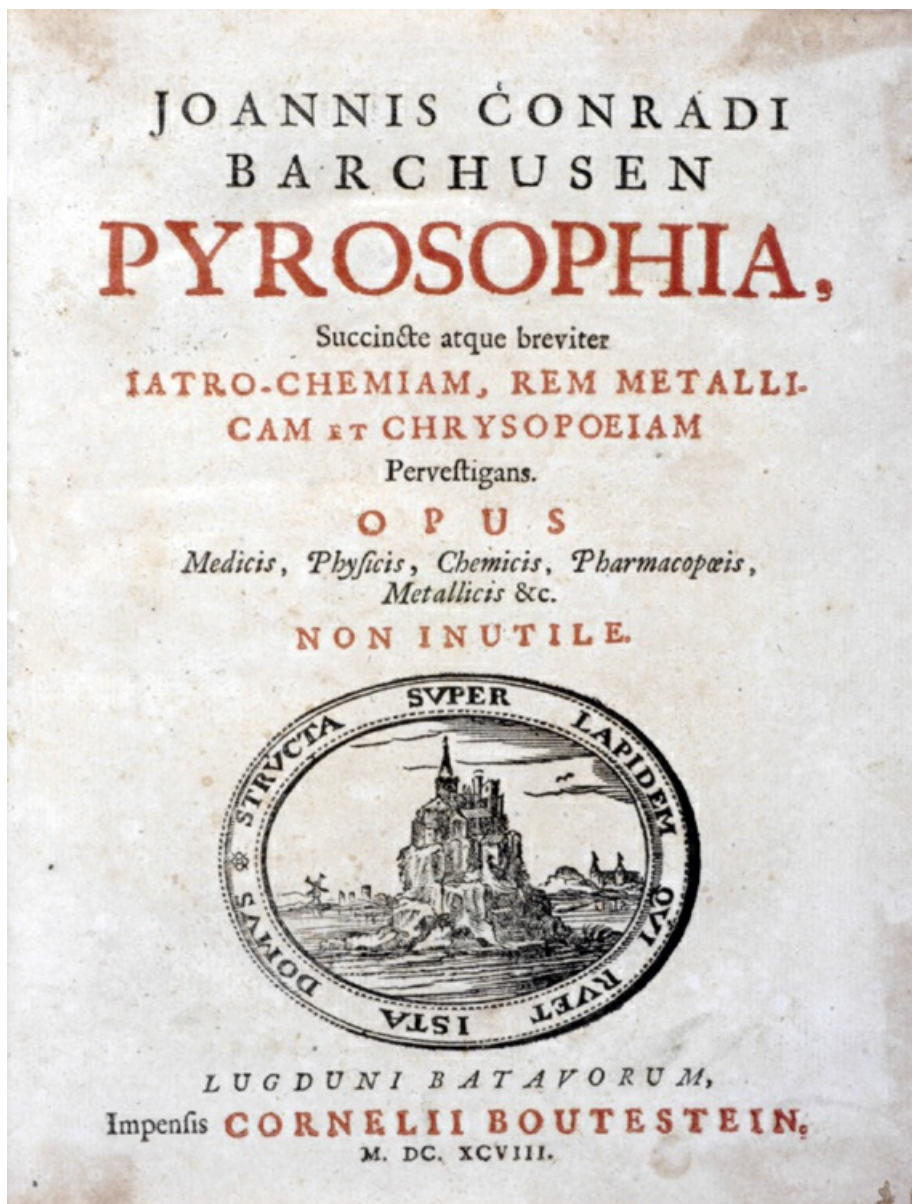
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*By Jeremiah Battle, M.D., reprinted in North Carolina University Magazine, 1861, and again in Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina; A Documentary History, 1790-1840, Volume I* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1908), pp. 2–3.*

As to the "progress of civilization," little can be said here. Knowledge is certainly more abundant than formerly. Learning, morality <sup>[2]</sup> and religion are more encouraged, or at least viewed with more complacency <sup>[3]</sup>. The peaceful, social and humane virtues, it is believed, have more than kept pace with the growth of population. A thirst for knowledge was never great here. The people are neither aspiring, restless nor basely servile <sup>[4]</sup>. They are generally satisfied with their political situations, and seldom trouble their minds with politics <sup>[5]</sup>. There are not more than one hundred and eight newspapers taken weekly in the county. Although learning is not generally diffused <sup>[6]</sup>, yet since the establishment of the University of this State there are more who possess liberal education now that at any former period.

There is a certain suavity <sup>[7]</sup> of manners employed in many places by candidates for popular favor very little studied or desired here till within a few years past. It consists in a peculiar <sup>[8]</sup> shake of the hand, called by our farmers the electioneering shake -- in purchasing brandy and drinking with the people-- persuading them to get drunk, whereby they may lose sight of the object of an election -- flattering and gulling <sup>[9]</sup> the people with empty professions of extraordinary devotion <sup>[10]</sup> to their interests, &c. These means when artfully employed generally answer the desired end. Twenty years ago the practice was unknown in Edgecombe, and was considered as the reproach <sup>[11]</sup> of some of our neighboring counties. It has since those days been introduced as a refinement <sup>[12]</sup> -- but as the first attempts at this innovation it was viewed as an indication of distrust to the sober <sup>[13]</sup> judgment of the people. But so fascinating was the liquor that its use on these occasions became fashionable, and popular among all classes, and a liberal distribution of it became necessary to a man's election....

There are seventeen county schools in the county, at which are about 400 scholars; nothing more is attempted to be taught in them than the elements of reading, writing and arithmetic, and but few of the teachers are qualified to do justice to those. Notwithstanding this apparently infant state of literature, we may easily discover that it is progressing; for fifty years ago there was not more than one or two schools in the limits of the whole county. For want of an academy in this county several have sent to those in the adjacent <sup>[14]</sup> ones, viz: At Westrayville and Vine Hill. It is in prospect <sup>[15]</sup> to establish an academy at Mount Prospect, in this county, and we can not account for the delay otherwise than for the general indifference <sup>[16]</sup> with which learning is still viewed.



[17]

The title page of this 1698 chemistry book is in Latin, one of the "dead languages."

It is to be apprehended that in this country general knowledge will never characterize many of its citizens as long as [the dead languages are viewed as the basis of a liberal education](#). This county has never been prolific in men of talents, or they have been obscured for want of opportunities of education....

We have but few more of literary talents in the county; the means of education having heretofore been much [circumscribed](#) [18]; we have more now, however, than at any former period; and we have never been [destitute](#) [19] of men in whom we could confide our interests. Before the establishment of our University no children were sent out of the county to any college or academy.

At present [there is only one professional law character in the county](#) and he a native of the county; but there are more physicians than at any former period, who can not [boast](#) [20], however, of greater [erudition](#) [21]. [Quacks](#) [22] are abundant and are privileged to boast.

It is believed that about [two-thirds of the people generally can read; and one-half of the males write their names, but not more than one-third of the women can write](#). The girls now at school are learning and are very desirous to write; it is [deemed](#) [23] a more important accomplishment in that sex, among the common people now than formerly.

The progress of learning for twenty-five years back has been slow, and perhaps has not more than kept pace with the population, till within these two or three years. The people now [manifest](#) [24] some [disposition](#) [25] to diffuse learning; perhaps from their finding the means of obtaining it more accessible now than heretofore. The custom at the public schools, and in some towns, among those who are desirous of intellectual improvement, has found its way here. [Societies have been formed](#), and kept up with a tolerable degree of spirit, greatly to the benefit of the members thereof, both in talents and morals. Novelty is a great matter here. We are generally ready to encourage any new institution that promises beauty or utility, but when it becomes familiar we grow indifferent.

Three or four years ago [a subscription was set on foot for establishing a free school](#) for the education of poor children in the county -- two or three hundred dollars were soon [subscribed](#) [26]. A few children received the benefit of this subscription (for it never became an institution) but as the matter never got into proper hands it [languished](#) [27] and died. But unhappily

for want of [sufficient](#) <sup>[28]</sup> interest in literary pursuits, and perhaps for want of a more permanent residence of many who compose these societies, they have generally languished in a few months, and are with difficulty sustained. Some attempts have been made to [procure](#) <sup>[29]</sup> libraries, but this for some of the above reasons, was never effected, except by a society that was in existence about fifteen years ago. On the [dissolution](#) <sup>[30]</sup> of that body the books were scattered abroad, or divided among those who contributed to the establishment. The agricultural society has appropriated a sum of money to procure an agricultural library. Some donations are made of books for this purpose. On the fourth day of July, 1810, proposals were made for the establishment of a society for the promotion of agriculture and the arts. The plan has succeeded, so far as to go into operation. It has now upwards of thirty respectable members, whose public spirit is thus manifested, greatly to their benefit, and it is hoped to the benefit of the county....

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