

North Carolina Society in 1953 and in 2003 ^[1]



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by Gary Freeze

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North Carolina has always been a place where the old and the new live side by side. The time period from 1953 to 2003 is no different. Although patterns from the past, such as eating barbecue or listening to [country music](#) ^[2], are still part of the state scene, many aspects of life today differ from those in 1953. Most young people in the state, for example, assume that the Atlantic Coast Conference has been here forever, but it was new in 1953. And back then Davidson College was part of the Big Five, with [the University of North Carolina](#) ^[3], North Carolina State, [Wake Forest](#) ^[4], and Duke.

Today, just about every North Carolinian has access to the new types of communication and technology. Cell phones and cable television lines seem to be everywhere. Most residents of the state are no more than thirty minutes from a multilane highway, and those roads take them to big cities that have all the amenities they are used to: fast-food outlets, “big box” stores that sell just about everything, and lots of traffic.

In 1953 most residents of the state still lived in the country or in towns with fewer than one thousand people. Most North Carolinians were just getting “modern” conveniences. For example, there were 288,000 farm families in the state. Only 44,000 of them had telephones in 1953. More than 62,000 of those farms lacked electricity. More than half the roads in the state were unpaved, and only a few were more than two lanes in width. Interstate highways were a decade away.

Even the cities were small, given the size of urban places elsewhere in the nation. In 1953 Charlotte was nearly twice as big as any other North Carolina city, just as it is today. Charlotte then had 134,000 people. Today, there are more than 570,000. In 1953 the next largest city was Winston-Salem, with 87,000 people. Today, the second-largest city is Raleigh, which has more than 280,000 residents. Some cities have literally been created in the last fifty years. The biggest example is Cary. In 1953 it was a small town of just over one thousand people in the middle of rural [Wake County](#) ^[5]. Today, more than 100,000 people live in Cary in a string of subdivisions, a style of development that hardly existed half a century ago. In contrast, some small towns have remained the same size, such as Walnut Cove and Faison.

Fifty years ago, the electronic world of today was not evident to most North Carolinians. For example, fewer than one in ten state residents had a television, and there were only two stations operating in the state: Channel 3 in Charlotte and Channel 2 in Greensboro. Both stations were four years old at the time. It was common in the Piedmont for neighbors to go to the one house with a television and watch shows together, just as they had gathered in years past to talk and sing or listen to the radio. North Carolinians were excited about television, though. Nine new stations were planned during 1953—in Raleigh, Greenville, Asheville, Charlotte, and even Mount Airy. (The one in Mount Airy was never built.)

In 1953 Tar Heels shopped in a different way. Belk's was a major place to buy clothing and other goods, but there were no malls or huge stores out on bypasses. The A&P was the most popular grocery in the state, but often people went to locally run stores that operated in just one location. Ralph Ketner had a small market in downtown Salisbury. The Teeter brothers had a new-fangled “supermarket” on the edge of downtown Mooresville. (These stores became the basis for Food Lion and Harris Teeter, respectively, and they are today's leading North Carolina groceries.) Most residents still had monthly accounts at little stores at country crossroads or on the corner in urban neighborhoods. Many had their groceries delivered. Few goods came in the mail, and if they did, they came from Sears and Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, or Spiegel, all companies based in Chicago.

North Carolinians had different [banking](#) ^[6] habits in 1953. They could visit a branch bank, a place owned by one company but located in more than one town. The largest bank by far then was Wachovia. It had branches in most western towns. Branch Banking and Trust (BB&T), the largest bank in the east, had \$122 million in assets. Today, BB&T is located across the state, and its worth exceeds \$19 billion. Union National Bank had four branches in Charlotte. American Trust Company of Charlotte was even smaller. It would later merge with a Greensboro bank to become North Carolina National, grow to be NationsBank, and today it is [Bank of America](#) ^[7]. Union Bank later became [First Union](#) ^[8] and recently merged with Wachovia. No one in 1953 could even envision the state's becoming a world banking center, but it happened.

The greatest social change has been an end to racial segregation. In 1953 North Carolinians attended segregated schools and ate at separate places in public restaurants. Even the hospitals were segregated. Some public hospitals had beds in different wings for the different races, but in 1953 sixty-six hospitals were still for whites only, and another fifteen took (if needed) only blacks.

A second significant shift has been in how North Carolinians make their livings. In 1953, 25 percent of the state's

residents lived on farms, yet only 4 percent do so today. North Carolina natives did most of the work back then. The few migrant workers who came to the state, some of whom were Hispanic, stayed only for harvest season and then moved on. Today, Hispanics make up the fastest growing portion of the state's permanent population.

The crops that state residents grow have changed over the half-century. Since cotton was so important in 1953, some schools closed during harvest season to let young people pick the crop. By the 1970s, cotton had nearly disappeared from the state, although its production has been revived today in some areas. More than 700,000 acres of tobacco were planted in 1953, and North Carolina was known as Tobacco Road. The plants were taken from the fields around Wilson and Greenville and were made into cigarettes in downtown Durham, Winston-Salem, and Reidsville. Today, the allotted acreage has decreased to 163,000, and tobacco is mostly a memory in Durham. R. J. Reynolds, however, still makes cigarettes near Winston-Salem.

Today, more North Carolinians grow crops specifically for human and animal consumption, such as soybeans. Organic farmers grow for local restaurants that are nationally famous, like the Magnolia Grill in Durham. With the exception of the fish camps at Calabash on the coast, North Carolina had no nationally famous places to eat in 1953. Mountain residents now grow Fraser firs for Christmas trees. In 1953 almost all state residents went out into the countryside and cut down a cedar for their holiday. Mount Olive Pickle Company still uses local cucumbers for its products, although the company has grown so much that only a third of the pickles are locally grown.

North Carolina has remained a manufacturing state throughout the period, but the three principal industries of 1953—textiles, tobacco, and furniture—are in decline today. All three industries have lost significant numbers of workers in the last few years. In 1953 the majority of North Carolinians made their living in some way, directly or indirectly, from these three products. Today, banking, tourism, and even hog farming are more prevalent.

The political climate has also changed. In 1953 almost every elected official in the state was a Democrat. Only one congressman, Charles Jonas of Lincolnton, was a Republican. There were one state senator and twelve representatives from the Republican ranks. Today, North Carolina has a healthy two-party system, with the Republicans holding a slight majority in many recent elections. Also, women have become more important in positions of leadership. Today, women head many departments and divisions in state government. In 2000 Beverly Perdue became the state's first female lieutenant governor. In 2002 Elizabeth Dole of Salisbury became the first woman from North Carolina to be elected to the United States Senate. In addition, African Americans have gained their civil rights and become important voters and officeholders in the state. Their ranks include such leaders as Dan Blue, a former state house speaker, and Henry Frye, a former state supreme court chief justice.

One thing has not changed much: It is still 543 miles from Manteo to Murphy on the state road map, and even with improvements in [automobiles](#) ^[9], it still takes a day to drive from one place to the other.

At the time of this article's publication, Gary Freeze was an associate professor of history and the James F. Hurley Scholar in Residence at [Catawba College](#) ^[10] in Salisbury. He has also served on the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association Advisory Board.

Subjects:

[Black and African American People](#) ^[11]

[Agriculture](#) ^[12]

[Banks and banking](#) ^[13]

[Industry](#) ^[14]

[Politics and government](#) ^[15]

[Segregation](#) ^[16]

Authors:

[Freeze, Gary](#) ^[17]

From:

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[1] <https://ncpedia.org/50-years-change> [2] <https://ncpedia.org/country-music> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/university-north-carolina-chapel-hi> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/wake-forest-university> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/wake> [6] <https://ncpedia.org/banking> [7] <https://ncpedia.org/bank-america> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/first-union-bank-corporation> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/automobiles> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/catawba-college> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/african-americans> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/agriculture> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/banks-and-banking> [14] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/industry> [15] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/politics-and-gove> [16] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/segregation> [17] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/freeze-gary> [18] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/tar-heel-juni>