

# Tobacco's Roots Deep In American History

[Editor's note: Throughout North Carolina's history, tobacco has been an important industry and is still the largest in the state. Financial Times farm editor Bill Humphries traces its early history].

by **BILL HUMPHRIES**  
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In 1776, Gen. George Washington's tattered military forces suffered a serious setback in the war for independence. They lost New York to the British.

Appealing to his countrymen for support for the American forces, Washington said: "I say, if you can't send money, send tobacco."

During the early period of U.S. involvement in World War I, general John J. Pershing sent a message to his fellow Americans back home: "You ask me what we need to win this war. I answer tobacco as much as bullets."

Aristocrat William Byrd of colonial Virginia described the tobacco plant as "that bewitching vegetable." On the other hand, poet G.L. Hemminger wrote:

"Tobacco is a dirty weed. I like it.

"It satisfies no normal need. I like it."

American Indians were using tobacco for social, ceremonial and even medicinal purposes long before Columbus discovered the New World. In time, first for the Spanish and later for the English, tobacco became a highly valuable commodity in world trade.

Sir Walter Raleigh, a confirmed pipe smoker, did so much to popularize tobacco usage in his country that one literary figure (James M. Barrie) later suggested England should have changed its name in his honor.

But when King James I ascended the British throne in the early 17th century, he issued a pamphlet, "A Counterblaste to Tobacco," for the avowed purpose of shaming the English into giving up "the vile use (or rather abuse) of taking tobacco."

It was John Rolfe, known in history as the English settler who married the Indian maiden Pocahontas, who was the first Virginia colonist to realize the potential of tobacco as an export commodity to the mother country. Without tobacco, the survival of the colony would have been in grave doubt.

Rolfe planted his first commercial crop in 1612 and shipped it to England the next year. It was an immediate success because he produced a mild, pleasant-tasting type of leaf, known in scientific circles today as "Nicotiana tabacum," whose seed he somehow obtained from the West Indies.

The long and colorful history of tobacco reflects to a large degree the history of America. It is a commodity that has affected our political development, our social customs, our economic growth and even our educational and religious history.

In colonial times tobacco was a commodity money, the standard medium of exchange. By statute it was acceptable in payment of debts, taxes and other obligations, including church tithes.

When the first shipment of prospective brides arrived at Jamestown in 1619, a settler who wanted one of the maids for a wife was required to pay for her passage across the Atlantic with 120 pounds of good-quality leaf.

A court case involving tobacco brought

fame to Patrick Henry. Two short crops in the 1750s caused the price of tobacco in Virginia to rise sharply. The colonial Assembly passed a law providing that for one year, debts and tithes payable in tobacco could be paid off in money at the rate of two pennies per pound of leaf owed.

Clergymen of the established church objected vigorously. They wanted to be paid in high-priced tobacco at the set rate of 16,000 pounds a year.

One minister sued to collect damages from his parishioners. Henry defended the tobacco growers. He charged that the clergy were greedy and would "snatch from the hearth of their honest parishioner his last hoe-cake, from the widow and her orphan children their last milk cow! the last bed, nay the last blanket from the lying-in woman!"

After Henry's impassioned plea, the jury awarded the suing minister exactly one penny in damages! More importantly, perhaps, the young lawyer had discovered his talents as an orator and sharpened his belief in opposition to the British Crown and in independence for America.

Down through the years tobacco has been used in various ways—snuffing, chewing, smoking pipe, cigar or cigarette, and perhaps in other forms. Snuffing was highly popular in Europe for decades. Chewing reached its peak in the United States in the 1890s, when there were thousands of brands of plug and twist on the market.

An event near Yanceyville in Caswell County in 1839 set the stage for emergence of the cigarette.

A young slave named Stephen, on the Abisha Slade farm, was curing tobacco with open wood fires on the dirt floor of the barn when he fell asleep and let the fires die out. Upon awakening, he frantically rushed to a nearby blacksmith pit, fetched some smoldering charcoal logs, and used them to finish out the cure.

The tobacco cured out to a sparkling lemon-yellow color unlike any ever before seen.

In time, curing with flameless charcoal to produce Bright tobacco became widespread. Later, flues were added to barns, to remove undesirable fumes and smoke during the curing process.

The first modern blended cigarette, using Bright or flue-cured tobacco as its main ingredient, was placed on the market by R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. in 1913. A few years later, American Tobacco Co. came out with its Lucky Strike brand and Liggett & Myers produced Chesterfield. These three brands dominated the cigarette market for many years.

James Albert Bonsack, a young Virginian invented a cigarette making machine which was quickly placed in operation in the factory of Washington Duke and sons in Durham. That was in 1884. A year later, U.S. cigarette manufacture passed the one billion mark for the first time.

By 1921, cigarette smoking had become the dominant form of tobacco usage in the United States. Today, factories in Durham, Greensboro, Reidsville and Winston-Salem produce about 55% of the 650 billion smokes manufactured in this country each year. North Carolina farmers grow two-thirds of the nation's flue-cured crop.

Have you see this month's

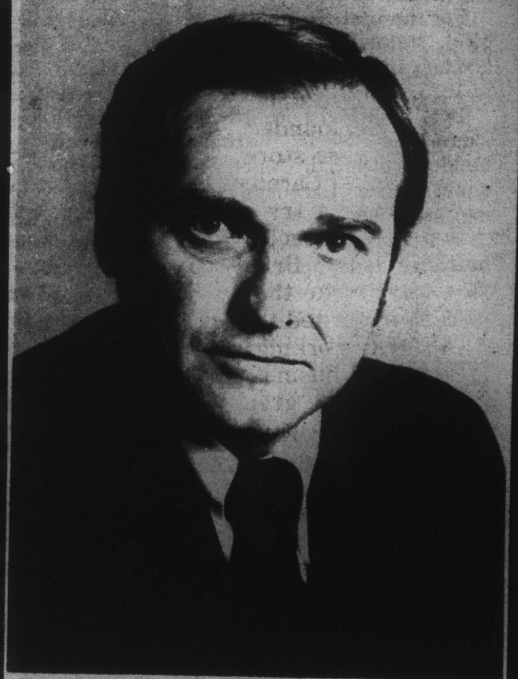
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