

Cates, Charles Fletcher ^[1]

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by Charles M. Ingram, 1979

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Charles Fletcher Cates, businessman and agricultural leader, was born near the town of Swepsonville in Alamance County ^[2]. His ancestors came to America from England and settled in Orange County ^[3] in the late 1700s. His father, Henry Manly Cates, served with General Joseph E. Johnston at the Battle of Bentonville ^[4], and his mother, Elizabeth Bradshaw, was the daughter of a local planter. He had four brothers and a sister, Alonzo Edward, J. Sidney, H. Leo, Henry Roy, and lone V. His father and sister and most of his brothers were Baptists ^[5]; his mother was a Methodist ^[6].

Cates attended the local schools and also Scottsburg College in Scottsburg, Va. Following college he worked for a time as a traveling salesman with a wholesale grocery concern in Lynchburg, Va. He soon returned to the family farm near Swepsonville. In 1898 he established the Cates Pickle Manufacturing Company, carrying on a family tradition. Elizabeth Bradshaw Cates, an industrious woman, had earned the money for her children's education by preparing jams, jellies, pickles, and preserves, which were then sold by wagon throughout the Swepsonville community, a mill village on the Haw River.

In 1905, Cates bought a farm in the Woodlawn community near Mebane, also in Alamance County. From here, for the next several years, he continued to produce canned goods that were sold primarily to college cafeterias, including those of Salem ^[7], Trinity ^[8], and The University of North Carolina ^[9]. Following World War I ^[10], food prices were controlled by the government, and the price of sugar was set at thirty cents a pound. Cates managed to obtain a supply of several freight car loads of this necessary ingredient, whereupon the price was reduced to ten cents a pound. The years 1919 and 1920 were critical ones, but the little company managed to survive.

Through various civic activities, Cates had made the friendship of John Sprunt Hill ^[11], an attorney in Durham ^[12] who was a native of Faison in Duplin County ^[13]. Hill had married into the wealthy Watts family of Durham and through attention to business had become a wealthy man. Desiring to do something for his native community of Faison, Hill persuaded Cates to move his pickle operation there, and the local farmers were soon persuaded to begin growing the variety of cucumber that was best for pickling.

After his move to Mebane in 1905, when his business prospered, Cates began to take an interest in the affairs of the community. He served as a committeeman for the Woodlawn School and also as a member of the Alamance County Board of Education from 1910 to 1914. He next served as a member of the Alamance County Board of Commissioners. He was defeated in a bid for election to the North Carolina Senate, probably because of his support of a bill passed in 1914, while he was a county commissioner, that allowed rural communities to incorporate. The Woodlawn community had incorporated in an effort to improve schools and roads, and taxes were, of necessity, raised. Cates continued to work for local improvements and, along with R. W. Scott, father of the late Governor W. Kerr Scott ^[14], was one of the prime movers in the school consolidation movement. The local school, Alexander Wilson High School, formed in 1922, was one of the earliest consolidated schools in North Carolina.

Cates was always interested in developments that would improve the life of his neighbors and fellow agriculturalists. He assisted in the organization of a number of farmers' cooperatives, the best known of which was the Guilford Dairy Cooperative. He later served as president of the North Carolina Milk Producers' Association. During the early 1900s he was active in the North Carolina Farmers' Alliance, serving as president and as a member of the executive committee that invited the Grange to organize in North Carolina. He served as a trustee of North Carolina State College ^[15] in Raleigh ^[16] and, following the establishment of the consolidated university system, was a member of the board of trustees of The University of North Carolina. He also served on the North Carolina State Board of Agriculture and was named a Master Farmer.

In 1900, Cates married Margaret ("Maggie") Pittard, the daughter of George Washington Pittard of the Grassy Creek community of Granville County ^[17]. They had met while both were students at Scottsburg College. Three sons were born to them: Addis Pittard, long associated with Charles F. Cates and Sons and later president of A. P. Cates Pickle Sales Company; Chester Howard, a farmer and dairyman in Mebane; and George Henry, sales manager of Charles F. Cates and Sons Pickle Company.

Cates suffered a stroke of paralysis on 25 July 1947 during a business trip to Washington, D.C. He was a patient at Emergency Hospital in Washington and then returned home about one month before his death in Mebane. His funeral was held at Phillips Chapel Methodist Church, near Graham, and he was buried in the Bradshaw and Parrish section of the church cemetery.

References:

Addis P. Cates of Faison, personal interview.

Greensboro Daily News, scattered issues.

North Carolina State Archives (Raleigh).

Raleigh News and Observer, scattered issues.

Subjects:

Biographies ^[18]

Business leaders ^[19]

Farmers ^[20]

Public officials ^[21]

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Origin - location:

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1 January 1979 | Ingram, Charles M.

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