

Case Study

View from Southeastern North Carolina

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With further original reporting by journalist **Stephanie Carson**



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JUST OFF INTERSTATE 95 in Robeson County, North Carolina, a square industrial colossus rises from a landscape of narrow roads and farmland. At this facility, more than a thousand employees process 1.25 million chickens a week.¹¹³ Depending on your perspective, this chicken plant, owned by the national conglomerate Sanderson Farms, represents the fulfillment of a desperate economic need—or the introduction of environmental catastrophe.

In 2016, Sanderson Farms settled on a large tract of land just north of the Robeson County seat of Lumberton to build its plant. Many considered it a coup for the county, as it had attracted a company with a net worth of over \$3 billion.¹¹⁴ For Robeson, turning down the prospect of jobs and paychecks seemed like an unaffordable luxury, even if they also came with the potential risk of dirty soil and water. The county has the second-highest poverty rate in North Carolina, with a median income of around \$32,000 and close to 30 percent of its 132,000 residents living below the poverty line.¹¹⁵ And yet a massive chicken plant can wreak major environmental damage,¹¹⁶ and many poultry plants around the country also have problematic working conditions.¹¹⁷

Robeson wasn't Sanderson Farms' first choice for the new plant—that was neighboring Cumberland County,¹¹⁸ which is larger and wealthier, with a population of 332,000 and a median income of around \$45,000.¹¹⁹ Among other advantages, Cumberland gets a boost from the military base at Fort Bragg and is anchored by the city of Fayetteville.¹²⁰ While both places are contending with poverty, the decline of manufacturing, and the difficulty of maintaining an agricultural economy, those challenges are starker in Robeson.¹²¹

In rural North Carolina, as across America, a higher poverty rate correlates with a diminished local news landscape.¹²² In this particular tale of two neighboring

counties in southeastern North Carolina, both Robeson and Cumberland have experienced declines in local news coverage, but Robeson is paying a steeper price than its more affluent neighbor.

IN CUMBERLAND COUNTY, *The Fayetteville Observer* traces its roots to 1816 and is one of the mighty media institutions in a state renowned for its dynamic newspaper culture. For almost a hundred years, the *Observer* was owned by the Hale family and became one of the largest family-owned papers in the country.¹²³

Its coverage in 2014 and early 2015 of Sanderson Farms' plans to open a chicken plant in the area shows just how impactful local journalism can be. As residents packed meetings and forced a deep conversation about the county's future,¹²⁴ the paper played a crucial role in amplifying their voices. It investigated the implications of the plant and gave all sides a say in both news and opinion pieces. The *Observer's* reporting, alongside the less-than-enthusiastic public response, were key factors in the reluctance of local officials to welcome the plant and of Sanderson Farms' ultimate decision to build in neighboring Robeson County instead.

As the company was making its play for Cumberland County, the *Observer* published about 170 news and opinion items that mentioned the plant.¹²⁵ Tim White, a longtime reporter and editorial page writer who retired earlier this year, wrote in a 2015 column that county leaders hadn't proven that they had done enough to assess and protect residents from environmental risks. "Again, who's doing that homework?" he asked. "It doesn't appear that any of our elected leaders want to do it. Maybe they'll just claim the dog ate their homework, if we have ugly unintended consequences down the road. After all, they went to the Sanderson plant in Kinston and didn't



Reporter Greg Barnes worked for The Fayetteville Observer for decades before taking a buyout in 2018. Toward the end of his time there, he says his job became plugging gaps rather than doing the investigative work that was his trademark.

smell anything bad or see feathers on the road. So it must be OK, right? I'd love to see a thousand new jobs here too. But not if the source of those jobs is going to foul our air and water."¹²⁶

The *Observer* has a history of pushing and prodding, with investigative journalists and a lively editorial page. It's one of the big drivers of Fayetteville's relatively healthy civic ecosystem, according to Frank Taylor, managing editor of the investigative news site Carolina Public Press and a former editorial writer for the *Observer*. The Fayetteville community, he says, has a tradition of "rabble rousers" whose voices are amplified in the newspaper's pages, keeping residents actively involved in local issues. "Media presence," Taylor says, "made that culture possible."¹²⁷

The *Fayetteville Observer* has long been the primary source of original reporting in the area, with radio and television outlets often picking up and expanding its scoops. In its heyday, in the 1980s and '90s, the *Observer* had dozens of reporters and was proud to compete with larger metro newspapers in Raleigh and Charlotte on big stories throughout the state. But like so many publications confronted with the challenges of an advertising-based business model in the digital age, it began

shedding staff in recent years. The *Observer* hung onto its status as the largest independently owned newspaper in the state until GateHouse Media, a hedge fund-backed newspaper chain, purchased it in 2016. "GateHouse-owned newsrooms," according to a study by Penelope Muse Abernathy, an expert in media consolidation and the decline of local news at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "are often half the size within a matter of months."¹²⁸

As it has done elsewhere, GateHouse immediately shrunk the *Observer's* newsroom further, reportedly offering an undisclosed number of buyouts.¹²⁹ In 2017 and 2018, it offered yet more buyouts.¹³⁰ This past August, it was announced that GateHouse was merging with Gannett, another newspaper giant, which media industry observers expect will lead to further cuts and consolidation.¹³¹

The *Observer* continues to earn plaudits, especially for relaying vital information during hurricanes. But while there are alternative outlets, including on social media, that provide basic information about government services and where to go in an emergency, those who care about the future of Fayetteville and Cumberland County say they worry about what happens when a respected, independent publication no longer has the strength to push back against government or conduct comprehensive investigations.

John Malzone, a prominent Fayetteville developer, laments that the *Observer* is a shell of its former self. He worries that, without their own locally-based television station (ABC 11 and WRAL, both based in the Raleigh area, only occasionally cover the community), residents will no longer be able to communicate as they once did, even if it's just about new restaurants and business openings. Malzone says that it's difficult to reconcile what he views as the city's bright prospects, brimming with new development and business, with the state of its local media. "We went from having one of the best local newspapers in the state," he says. *Observer* reporters "were everywhere." Now Raleigh reporters "only come down if there's a murder."¹³²

As of October, the *Observer* listed 19

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news and opinion reporters and editors on its website. No one holds an investigative reporting title. (Executive Editor Lorry Williams didn't respond to requests for an interview.)¹³³ The reductions are noticeable. Christine Michaels, head of the business association the Greater Fayetteville Chamber, says that the results of big decisions affecting the business community are usually still reported—but sometimes too late for the community to weigh in. She points out that plans for the construction of a new minor league baseball stadium in downtown Fayetteville weren't covered until most major decisions had already been made, leaving broad swathes of the community out of the discussion. "We have a big Facebook following, a large email subscriber list," she says, "but it's not going to hit a broader base of the population."¹³⁴

As an investigative reporter who started at the *Observer* in 1989, Greg Barnes delved deeply into the systemic reasons for poverty in Fayetteville, traveled all over the country to research solutions for violent crime in the city, and examined problems with the state's child welfare agency. His investigations prompted deep discussion and, often, action from local leaders. In 2018, Barnes took a buyout.

On a recent drive around Fayetteville, Barnes, noticed something that gave him pause: A knot of police surrounded a burned-up tractor trailer. He snapped a picture with his phone and texted it to the *Observer's* executive editor, who told him she would send a photographer.

Barnes laughed. It had been more than a year since he worked for the paper, but he can't help himself.¹³⁵ This is the kind of story, easily grabbed with a photo and maybe a call to the police station, that will continue to get some coverage going forward. But what about the rest?

Barnes reflected on his December 2015 series, "Poverty's Price," which assessed the local legacy of mass incarceration and the drug wars, the link between poverty and failing schools, and the school-to-prison pipeline in Fayetteville. After publication, it led to the city council applying for a grant and committing to specific initiatives to improve the city's poorest neighborhoods.¹³⁶ At the close

of the series, Barnes directly addressed his critics in the conservative area and summed up his thoughts in a personal column, concluding, "I hope this project serves as a starting point, one that evokes the conversation: OK, so now what do we do?"¹³⁷

But many see the *Observer* increasingly shying away from such big questions, and Barnes says that toward the end of his three decades there, his job had essentially become filling holes for the rapidly diminishing staff instead of doing the sprawling investigations that had long been his trademark.¹³⁸

Troy Williams—a local activist, member of the *Observer's* community advisory board, and talk-show host on AM radio—recalls another watchdog story that resonated widely but would probably not have happened today. In 2010, he wrote a column in the *Observer* revealing that the police department appeared to be targeting black residents for driving infractions.¹³⁹ In the wake of the column and follow-up coverage by reporters, the city manager and police chief lost their jobs and police reforms were enacted. When the issue of racial profiling gained national prominence in 2015, *The New York Times* cited Fayetteville's reforms as a model.¹⁴⁰



A burnt out tractor trailer in Fayetteville, North Carolina. While accidents continue to get some coverage in the local paper, The Fayetteville Observer, big picture investigative reporting is receding.



Activist Troy Williams wrote a column in *The Fayetteville Observer* revealing racial profiling of black drivers, leading to significant police reforms.

Williams gives the *Observer's* coverage “70 to 80 percent of the credit” for the reforms. “If we had to go through that today, I think we’d be in trouble,” he says. “We had real investigative reporters there. They ain’t there. These guys would be able to get away with murder now. If there’s nobody watching these rascals in the chicken coop, the foxes are going to take over.”¹⁴¹

THE OBSERVER’S DECLINE has been felt in Robeson County, too. Just a short car ride away from Cumberland, Robeson was often the beneficiary of the *Observer's* regional coverage. Today, Robeson TV viewers get sporadic coverage from ABC 11 and WRAL, but for local news that focuses on them rather than on their neighbors, the only regularly-published legacy option is a 5,000-circulation paper and website called *The Robesonian*. Like so many local outlets, it has changed ownership several times in recent years and its newsroom has been subjected to significant cuts; today, it’s owned by Champion Media.¹⁴²

Donnie Douglas, *The Robesonian's* editor, has been with the paper for over two decades; he says that, with a staff of 3.5 news reporters and 2 sports reporters, his job is to fill the five-times-a-week newspaper as best he can, however he can. That means, for the most part, lots of

municipal and school government meetings and crime coverage. Douglas is able to stack the opinion page with criticism of the county board, which he says is composed of “crooks—and I don’t use that word lightly.” But he has to pass on more ambitious stories. Even if he’s intrigued, he says, he’ll often think, “That story is probably too big for us.”¹⁴³ In a county with a long history of corruption, Douglas feels that the area’s officials would be even more out of control without the newspaper’s presence.

“We’re *it* in Robeson County,” Douglas says. “If you think we do a poor job or we do a good job, or you think we’re biased—and I’m sure there are people who believe some of those things—you’ve got no other options” for local news. Unless you want to count Facebook as a media source, which I do not.” Without *The Robesonian*, he says, “nobody knows who won the football game, nobody knows who dies.”¹⁴⁴

On a recent day, Douglas was unhappy with the way the Thursday edition had turned out, taking issue, in particular, with the front-page articles: one a national wire story about a drop in the stock market—Douglas prefers only local news on the front page—and the other a press release fashioned as a news story, written by a former *Robesonian* reporter who now works for the county hospital system.¹⁴⁵

Douglas’s reality—a small staff that doesn’t often delve deeply into malfeasance in its pages—is not new to small-town newspaper editors. Fiona Morgan, a North Carolina-based news consultant, said many see the issue facing local media purely in terms of economics or, “‘before everything worked and now it doesn’t,’ but many community newspapers have never done the kind of accountability reporting associated with bigger newspapers,” she said. “Not all local papers see it as their role to question authority in that way. You’ve always had news deserts even in places where there are outposts. Some local newspapers have been failing to provide aggressive accountability coverage for a long time, especially in rural communities. Where there’s no competition, there’s no pressure to do better.”¹⁴⁶

Douglas is unabashedly conservative and pro-business, and *The Robesonian*,

We went from having one of the best local newspapers in the state,” says developer John Malzone. Observer reporters “were everywhere.” Now Raleigh reporters “only come down if there’s a murder.”

on the whole, welcomed the Sanderson Farms chicken plant. In contrast to *The Fayetteville Observer's* robust, critical discussion of environmental issues, *The Robesonian* only published about 25 news and opinion stories about the plant's plans to move to the county, roughly one-seventh as many. Scott Bigelow, a longtime *Robesonian* reporter and editor who now works there part-time, attributes the newspaper's general dearth of agricultural reporting to the fact that no one has covered that beat full-time for years.¹⁴⁷ In March 2015, when Sanderson Farms made its final decision, *The Robesonian's* headline read: "Sanderson Picks Us."

ROBESON IS DIVERSE: 23 percent black, 31 percent white, and 42 percent American Indian. The county has a long history of tensions around race and inequality.¹⁴⁸ Some of those tensions have involved *The Robesonian* itself. In 1988, two activists, who identified themselves as members of the Tuscarora-Cherokees, took the newsroom in Lumberton hostage at gunpoint, a scene captured by a news crew in Raleigh.¹⁴⁹ The hostage takers demanded an investigation into local corruption and police brutality, hoping to draw attention to these issues and force change, and expressing frustration that the newspaper refused to hold those in power accountable.¹⁵⁰ While the merits of the claims and some aspects of the incredible turn of events are still debated to this day, the episode highlighted how chaos can erupt when people believe that their concerns are being ignored.

For a long time, Robeson was home to a singular outlet for the long-simmering frustrations of the local Lumbee tribe (which is not federally recognized, but comprises the majority of self-described Indians in the area). From 1973 to 2005, Bruce Barton, a local gadfly, advocate, and legend, challenged white authority and presented local news from a Lumbee perspective; for many years he was, alongside a few family members, almost single-handedly behind the *Carolina Indian Voice*, which became an integral part of the community and promoted the tribe's identity. Barton, who died in 2016, wrote forceful opinion pieces about Lumbee

issues, recounted their history, and covered community events.¹⁵¹ His investigations exposed discriminatory educational practices, police brutality, and political corruption.

Beyond shining a light on specific issues, Barton's newspaper initiated essential conversations—"Indians talking to other Indians," says Lorraine Ahearn, a longtime reporter and columnist for the Greensboro *News & Record* and a professor who researched the *Indian Voice's* early history for her dissertation at UNC. Barton and his paper helped the Lumbee "cohere around and debate things and make decisions as a community," ultimately forcing county leadership to pay attention and address their concerns. "He was really beating *The Robesonian* on a lot of stories," Ahearn says, "even as a one-man show."¹⁵²

Malinda Maynor Lowery, a UNC-Chapel Hill history professor and Lumbee tribe member, recalls that the two papers "were routinely criticizing each other for their version of their events. Sometimes *The Robesonian* would surprisingly align itself with the editorial voice of the *Indian Voice*." Lowery, who lived in Robeson County as a child, says that the *Indian Voice* helped instill a sense of Lumbee self-determination. When an item about her grandparents' 50th anniversary appeared in its pages, she says, "I remember that making a huge impression on me that my grandparents were in the paper. It's a matter of recognition and personal point of pride when an individual can recognize themselves in a media outlet."¹⁵³

AS LARGE CHAINS BUY, consolidate, and shrink local newspapers, the contraction of regional papers has further reduced original reporting in rural areas. In the past, *The News and Observer*, based in Raleigh, and the *News & Record*, based in Greensboro, kept tabs on Robeson County. "*The N&O* would come down and do a story" on local corruption, "and that would get results," says Melanie Sill, the *N&O's* former top editor and now a North Carolina-based news consultant.¹⁵⁴ Ahearn agreed, recalling that at one time the *News & Record* voraciously covered more than a dozen smaller cities and counties around Greensboro and sought



Animal waste lagoon in North Carolina.

to expose wrongdoing across the state, including in places like Robeson and Cumberland Counties.¹⁵⁵

Sill says she considers the retrenchment of the bigger regional dailies one of the gravest setbacks to hit small, rural communities. Both traditional sources and startups are trying to fill the void. WRAL's news operation does significant watchdog reporting across the state, including a recent story in Robeson County that revealed past misconduct by a group home housing migrant children.¹⁵⁶ Barnes now works for the nonprofit North Carolina Health News, founded in 2011, which sends him all over the state reporting on environmental stories. Recently he wrote about potentially toxic water in Pittsboro, alerting residents to the fact that the town hadn't notified them of the presence of a toxic compound.¹⁵⁷ After Barnes's stories were published, town officials eventually decided to notify residents.¹⁵⁸

Other nonprofit start-ups that cover statewide issues have sprung up in recent years as well. They include Carolina Public Press, an investigative news site, and NC Policy Watch, a left-leaning news and commentary site, among them. Founded in the early 1990s, *Carolina Journal*, a print and digital publication, and the John

Locke Foundation, a think tank, deliver news, analysis, and commentary from a conservative perspective; the foundation president's columns are reprinted in outlets across the state.¹⁵⁹

While Barnes and others see independent, nonprofit journalism as a potential model for the future, it's clear that, even combined, the statewide sites don't come close to employing the number of journalists that once covered rural North Carolina for legacy newspapers. And the lack of resources to pay them isn't the only challenge. Frank Taylor says that the Carolina Public Press depends primarily on freelancers, and good freelance reporters are hard to find in rural areas. "Those people," he says, "are fleeing and going somewhere else."¹⁶⁰

TO JEFF CURRIE, a water protection expert and environmental activist, the media seems to have plenty of resources when big news breaks. "Everybody was here when talking about the hurricane was sexy," he says, but he doesn't understand the point of reporting if it's not to uncover things like the influence of big agricultural companies and their impact on the environment. For Currie and others in Robeson County, the lack of a consistent independent voice that can push back and explore vital issues is palpable. "Really," he says, "the power of the newspaper is more than the power of 1—or even 10."¹⁶¹

Since the Sanderson Farms chicken plant opened in Robeson, farms that funnel chickens have cropped up elsewhere around the County, alarming environmentalists. More recently, a major natural gas pipeline was proposed that, if built, would ultimately run through Robeson as well.¹⁶² As an activist, Currie has found himself almost taking on the role of quasi-watchdog journalist, making a habit of driving around the county and noting the chicken farms' locations, their owners, and the water quality of the Lumber River, the area's primary water source. He says that *The Robesonian* published a letter to the editor that he wrote about the chicken plant and potential environmental issues. He hoped to receive a call from a reporter following up—but the call never came.¹⁶³

"I remember that making a huge impression on me that my grandparents were in the paper. It's a matter of recognition and personal point of pride when an individual can recognize themselves in a media outlet," says UNC professor Malinda Maynor Lowery.
