

How did gerrymandering begin in North Carolina? Consider Vance County

With NC gerrymandering drawing national attention, historians say the formation of Vance County in 1881 is one of the earliest examples.

by **Shelby Harris** · January 4, 2024



Vance County in 1919, roughly 40 years after the county was gerrymandered out of pieces of Franklin, Granville and Warren counties in order to maintain white, Democratic power in North Carolina. Photo courtesy of the Vance County Historical Society

Editor's note: This article, originally published Sept. 14, 2022, examines the roots of gerrymandering in Vance County, North Carolina. In 2023, the North Carolina Press Association recognized this article in its annual competition, winning first place for political reporting. [CPP](#) is reposting this article and other award-winning impactful journalism as we begin 2024. The article has not been updated to reflect any further developments and is based entirely on reporting prior to its original publication in 2022.

Fourteen miles wide and 28 miles long. That was the size of the land taken from Franklin, Granville and Warren counties in North Carolina to create Vance County in 1881, according to a

historical account by the first Vance County clerk of court, **James R. Young**, published in the Henderson Daily Dispatch in 1931.

Factors such as having a more centrally located courthouse contributed to the reassignment of land. However, historians agree that the move was mostly rooted in an effort to push Black voters in the existing counties into one area — effectively diminishing the power of residents' votes.

Today, even as the state still wrestles with allegations of gerrymandering, the history of **gerrymandering** in North Carolina can be traced in part to the formation of Vance County itself. The county, which is northeast of Raleigh, is arguably one of the first examples of gerrymandering in North Carolina.

“You take enough Republican African American voters out of Granville County and Franklin County, and those two counties would become majority white, and they would become Democratic. You’d write off Vance County,” said **Mark Pace**, North Carolina Room specialist for Granville County Public Libraries.

During the time, Pace explained, Black voters typically swung Republican.

Then, white North Carolinians were largely Democrats, a party consisting of Confederate supporters who would proudly tout the title of “white supremacist” **in coming years**.



Vance County in 1919, roughly 40 years after the county was gerrymandered out of pieces of Franklin, Granville and Warren counties in order to maintain white, Democratic power in North Carolina. Photo courtesy of the Vance County Historical Society

“So what you’re doing here is you’re getting two for one: you get two Democratic, white-majority counties for the price of one Black-majority county,” Pace said.

Before the N.C. General Assembly, which had only one Black representative at the time, approved Vance County’s establishment on May 5, 1881, state lawmakers had pitched the idea of forming a new county in the area twice before.

The first attempt was in 1879 when the legislature voted against calling the new county “Gilliam” after **Robert B. Gilliam**, a popular North Carolina judge and U.S. representative.

Shortly after, lawmakers tried again — this time calling the new county “Dortch,” after **William T. Dortch**, a state representative and Confederate soldier. This effort also failed.

Lawmakers returned in 1881 — this time proposing the name “Vance,” after former governor and Confederate soldier **Zebulon B. Vance**. Vance was pleased with the proposal and referred to the new county as “Zeb’s Black Baby,” according to [a book by the same name](#) written by historian **Samuel Peace** in 1955.

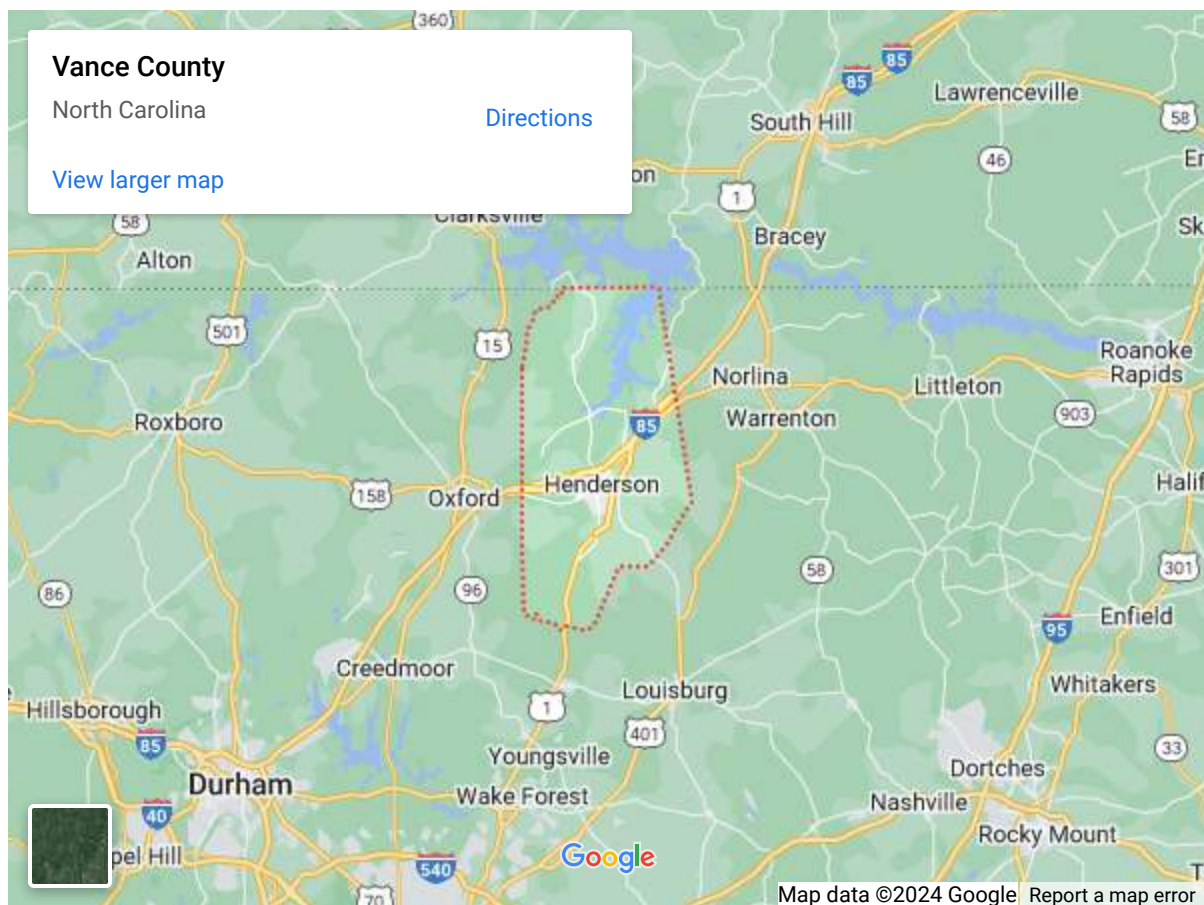
“I think gradually each time, a little more momentum (was) built for it,” Pace said. “But that kind of was the icing on the cake, the one that really kind of put it over the top, was the fact that it was named for Vance.”

Vance creation a ‘blatant example’ of gerrymandering

Harry Watson, professor of history at UNC Chapel Hill, said the formation of Vance County “may be one of the most blatant examples” of gerrymandering in North Carolina.

“This is the only case that I’m aware of where they created a permanent county for the purposes of changing election results,” Watson said, adding that it’s rare to see an entire county formed as a result of gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is generally defined as manipulating district lines in order to favor one party.

In 1890, the first time the U.S. Census Bureau compiled [data about Vance County](#), 63% of the county’s residents were Black. Statewide, Black North Carolinians made up only 31% of the population at the time.



“Creating a county becomes a permanent change,” he said. “That’s pretty hard to roll back the next time. Whereas, with normal gerrymandering with legislative districts, the party that’s disadvantaged can hope that they gain enough votes in the state to get the majority next year.”

Still, residents quickly created a unique, vibrant community.

“In the first years of Vance County, African Americans got elected to all the offices,” Pace said. “For 16 years, every representative in the state legislature from Vance County was African American, which was unusual.”

The majority of county residents were Black until about the early 1900s, when an influx of poor white people moved to the area for jobs in Vance County’s emerging cotton and tobacco industries, Pace said.

In recent decades, the majority switched again. Today, census data shows Vance County with a Black population of 52% and a white population of 44%.

But the shifting majority did not prove to mean much after 1900, when a constitutional amendment called the **Grandfather Clause** restricted who could vote. The clause deemed only people who voted or who had a direct lineal ancestor who voted in 1867 could cast a ballot.

Such laws “were passed preemptively in order to prevent a white-Black alliance in the future,” Watson said.

“That was the legal basis for the solid South, the sort of all-Democratic, all-white vote South that prevailed from the 1890s to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.”

And today?

Lawmakers in the 1880s may have been successful in isolating the votes of thousands of Black people by encircling Vance County with larger Democratic counties, but that’s not to say that residents did not prevail in making Vance a fruitful community.

Jobs were available within the tobacco and textile industries. Black Vance County residents held political offices. Many owned land and built families who would stay in the area for decades. Some residents can trace their roots to these first Vance County residents.

But some say the formation of Vance County on the pretext of Democrats clinging to power in Franklin, Granville and Warren counties has had an impact on the community even now, 141 years later.

“I’d like to say no, but unfortunately, we are our history,” Vance County Commission Chairman **Leo Kelly Jr.** said in response to whether Vance County’s history has affected the community’s current culture.

Kelly, 76, is the descendant of some of Vance County’s first residents — something he takes immense pride in.

“I use it as a positive thing that my ancestors contributed to the economic development of Vance County,” said Kelly, who is in his sixth year as a county commissioner.

“Because where the growth is taking place, that was owned by African Americans.”

As chairman of the commission, Kelly says he is focused on moving Vance County forward by attracting employers to the area, increasing access to a quality education and empowering young people to continue fighting toward equality and prosperity.

“I think we miss the opportunity a lot of times to use the situations that occurred as excellent teaching moments,” he said.

“Instead of trying to change the name of Vance County, understand how the name of Vance County came about,” he said. “It happened. It happened. So let’s move on.”