

St. Patrick's Train Ride Returns

Irish-inspired dinner train set for March 13 & 14

The North Carolina Transportation Museum will once again roll out the green carpet as its annual St. Patrick's Train Ride returns March 13 and 14, offering guests an evening of Irish-inspired dining and festive fun on the rails.

Guests are invited to wear their green and bring their Irish cheer for this popular dinner train experience. The event begins with a happy half hour featuring appetizers, wine and beer before passengers board the train. Dinner is then served as the train travels down the tracks, featuring a full Irish-inspired meal accompanied by a choice of beer or wine.

Tickets are \$64 per person for museum members and \$69 per person for non-members, plus tax. Organizers note that tickets are selling quickly for both Friday and Saturday evenings. All participants must be at least 21 years old and present valid photo identification at check-in.

The St. Patrick's Train is operated by the nonprofit N.C. Transportation Museum Foundation, which supports the museum by hosting a variety of events and activities throughout the year.

"The St. Patrick's Train is a fun time for couples and friends to come out and experience the luck of the Irish," said Marcus Neubacher, Director of Administration for the N.C. Transportation Museum Foundation. "An event like the St. Patrick's Train brings people to the museum who might not have visited before and will later return to see what the museum has to offer during other times of the year."

Purchase tickets online at nctransportationmuseum.org/st-patricks-day-train-ride. For additional information, call the museum at 704-636-2889.

The North Carolina Transportation Museum, located at 1 Samuel Spencer Drive in Spencer, is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. The museum is closed Monday.

Regular admission ranges from \$8 to \$10 based on age, with prices doubling when a train ride is added. Admission and train ride pricing may vary on special event days. The museum is part of the Division of State Historic Sites within the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.



Governor Stein Celebrates New Electrical Apprenticeship Initiative

Foundation aims to train 25,000 North Carolinians over next decade

Governor Josh Stein joined business and workforce leaders this week to celebrate the launch of Careers Electric, a new initiative led by the Siemens Foundation that aims to expand access to high-quality electrical training and create clear pathways into well-paying careers across North Carolina.

The national program is launching in North Carolina with a goal of training 25,000 people over the next 10 years for jobs in the energy and infrastructure sectors. The initiative is supported by a \$9.25 million investment led by the Siemens Foundation and developed in partnership with the North Carolina Governor's Office and other state and industry partners.

"North Carolina's strong workforce ecosystem, business-friendly climate, and surging demand for electrification position our state to lead the nation in building the skilled electrical workforce of the future," Stein said. "As our energy, technology and manufacturing sectors expand, this partnership opens the door for more North Carolinians to access high-quality training and secure good-paying careers that support families and strengthen our economy."

Careers Electric is designed to address growing workforce shortages in skilled trades by building a model in North Carolina that can later be expanded nationwide.

"For years we've heard about a widening skills gap and growing worker shortages in skilled trades," said David Etwiler, CEO of the Siemens Foundation. "Careers Electric provides a model to solve this — validating the solution in one state, then working together to scale it nationwide. It's about opening doors into high-demand, high-impact electrical careers that offer purpose-driven work, financial security and a strong foothold in the middle class."

Dr. Jeff Cox, president of the North Carolina Community College System, emphasized the role community colleges will play in preparing students for these jobs. "North Carolina is creating thousands of high-quality jobs that do not require a four-year degree," Cox said. "Our community colleges are proud to partner with employers and initiatives like Careers Electric to prepare students for these opportunities and to ensure our state has the skilled workforce needed to support continued economic growth."

Governor Stein also hosted a roundtable discussion with representatives from the Siemens Foundation, Siemens USA, ABB, Caterpillar, Duke Energy, the National Association of Manufacturers, the NC Chamber of Commerce, NC Electric Cooperatives and other state officials. During the discussion, Stein highlighted the importance of youth apprenticeships and shared his administration's goal of doubling the number of apprentices statewide.

Last week, the governor announced plans to allocate discretionary funds to support NC Career Launch, which helps businesses develop youth apprenticeship programs in high-demand sectors such as electrification. In December, the Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships released its year-end report outlining strategies to strengthen the state's workforce system and expand access to good-paying jobs.

North Carolina's workforce efforts have drawn national recognition. In January, Site Selection Magazine ranked the state as the 2026 Top State for Workforce Development, citing its strong apprenticeship and workforce training programs.

Bluegrass Pickers to Gather at the Library

If you hear banjos twanging, guitars strumming and the occasional fiddle trying to outrun them all, don't be alarmed - it's just Bluegrass Night at the Hampton B. Allen Library.

The library's popular Bluegrass Acoustic Set returns Thursday, March 12, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in the Little Theater, where musicians, singers and listeners gather for an evening devoted to the fine Appalachian tradition of picking, grinning and occasionally figuring out what chord comes next.

The session is open to musicians of all skill levels, from seasoned pickers who know every lick in the book to brave beginners still negotiating the mysteries of the G chord. Spectators are just as welcome, especially those who enjoy tapping a foot, clapping along or simply soaking up the sound.

All ages are welcome to attend, though children 12 and under must be accompanied by an adult - preferably one who appreciates a good banjo solo.

Anyone interested in joining the fun, bringing an instrument or simply enjoying an evening of down-home music is encouraged to come by. For additional information, call the Hampton B. Allen Library at 704-694-5177.

Chair Exercise Classes at the Library

The Hampton B. Allen Library is hosting chair exercise classes every Thursday. Class begins at 10:00 a.m. in the library's Pritchett Room. Everyone is welcome.



Mr. Hallman Conway Thomas

May 28, 1946 - February 23, 2026

Mr. Hallman Conway Thomas, 79, passed away on Monday, February 23, 2026, at his home in Peachland.

Born May 28, 1946, in Union County, he was a son of the late Hallman and Cornelia Little Thomas. He was also preceded in death by siblings Aaron Thomas, Gene Thomas, Martha Russell, and infant twin siblings deceased at birth.

Conway's greatest desire was to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone he met. He spread the gospel in many ways including putting the Word of God in people's hands and hearts through his involvement in Gideons International.

A funeral service to celebrate the life of Conway will be held at 12:30 p.m. on Thursday, February 26, 2026, at Deep Springs Baptist Church, with burial to follow at 1219 Union Church Road, Wadesboro, NC 28170.

The family will receive friends on Wednesday evening from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at Deep Springs Baptist Church.

Those left to cherish his memory include his wife, Marty Austin Thomas; children, Craig Thomas, Robert Thomas (Holly), Brad Austin (Rebecca) and Erin Johnston (David); grandchildren, Daniel, Jesse, Emma Solano (Christopher), David Mark, Patrick, Iain, Anna, Cora, Yates, Katelyn, Abby, Joshua, Andrew and Seth; great grandchildren, Ella Ann Rose; and siblings, Larry Thomas and Sandra Faulkner.

Memorials can be sent to Gideons International, via their website.

Morgan & Son Funeral Home is serving the family of Mr. Thomas.

Romans 10:9-11

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

With grateful hearts, the family of Conway Thomas thanks all who have surrounded us with prayers, kindness, and compassion.

We rejoice in the assurance that our husband, daddy, and papa finished his race and now is at rest in the presence of the Lord he faithfully served. Your love has been a reflection of God's loving grace to our family.

You Decide: What's Wrong With The Job Market?

The most recent job market report for January was received with much enthusiasm. Total jobs in the country increased by 130,000, the highest number since May 2025. The unemployment rate also fell, but only by one-tenth of 1 percent (0.1%). Still, that was an improvement - although modest - from 2025 when the jobless rate rose from 3.7% to 4.4%.

However, the news wasn't all good. Job growth was not widespread. Most of the job additions, specifically 60%, were in one sector: health care. Several sectors lost jobs, including financial services, transportation/information and the federal government. Also, job layoffs were high, wage growth was very slow, long-term unemployment (meaning 27 weeks or more without a job) remained high, and job growth in several previous months was revised downward.

It is important to recognize the job market could be worse. Jobs are not declining; they're just not rising significantly. And while the jobless rate is higher than we'd like, it is nowhere near the levels we see during a recession. It's also important to note that while North Carolina's economy continues to be stronger than the national economy, the state has also experienced a slowdown in the creation of new jobs.

What are the reasons for the sluggish job market? Economists point to three reasons, each of which is creating uncertainty for businesses. And when a business is uncertain, it usually becomes very cautious about adding new costs through more payroll.

The first generator of uncertainty for businesses is a change we are increasingly hearing, artificial intelligence (AI). Some economists have called AI the most transformative technology to impact the labor market since the tractor. The tractor was revolutionary because it reduced the need for labor in agriculture and dramatically increased the efficiency of agriculture, thereby allowing many more people to be fed. Consequently, not as many farmers were needed. As a result, a mass migration of farmers occurred from rural areas to cities. This was just at the time manufacturing was expanding in the cities and requiring workers.

The distinctive impact of AI is the technology's effect on both physical labor and cognitive labor. For example, AI will increase a robot's capability of performing many human tasks, especially in factories. But AI will also be used to perform cognitive tasks, like bookkeeping, various kinds of analysis, and even teaching. Millions of workers and businesses will be impacted.

Businesses know AI usage is spreading, and to be competitive they will need to incorporate it. But it's still uncertain when they will need to make the change and how extensive the change will need to be. This is likely one of the factors behind slow hiring.

A second reason why hiring has slowed is tariffs. Tariffs are a tax on incoming imports from foreign countries. Although some believe that tariffs are paid by the foreign exporter, in fact they are paid by the U.S. importer. It's estimated almost \$300 billion in tariffs has been collected from U.S. businesses by the U.S. government in 2025. This is a large new cost for businesses.

Again, tariffs have created more uncertainty for businesses. The rates have been changed several times. Higher tariffs have been imposed on some imports, while lower tariffs have been levied on other imports, and more changes can be made quickly. Most importantly, there is a pending Supreme Court decision on whether some of the tariffs are legal. If the Supreme Court rules that some tariffs are illegal, then the question becomes how the Trump administration will react and if they could substitute other types of tariffs. The result leads to more questions and additional uncertainty for businesses.

Lastly is mass deportations. Currently, estimates suggest almost 3 million individuals have been deported from the country, including those who have self-deported. Several economic sectors, such as construction and agriculture, have traditionally used foreign laborers. Deportations have reduced the labor supply for these sectors, even among legal immigrants, thereby curtailing hiring. Due to the physicality, seasonal nature of the work and relatively low pay, unemployed individuals often don't consider these jobs.

As long as these three factors remain, the sluggish job market will likely continue. However, one change could improve the labor market. This is if the pace of economic growth accelerates. In recent years the economy has been growing in the 2% to 3% range. If, as some are predicting, the national economic growth rate could rise to the 4% to 5% range, the need for additional jobs would likely overwhelm the uncertainties and other challenges businesses are now facing.

Some have tagged today's labor market the "no-fire, no-hire economy," meaning businesses want to keep the workers they currently have but don't want to add new workers. This makes it hard for new workers, like the high school and college graduates we will see in a few months. I always recommend what I call the KEF approach: knowledge, enthusiasm and flexibility. Job seekers should communicate — but not boast — about their skills, they should indicate they are excited about working for the company, and they should let the company know they are flexible with respect to the tasks, hours, pay and benefits of the job.

What will it take to improve the job market, and are we headed in that direction? You decide.

Mike Walden is a William Neal Reynolds Distinguished Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University.

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