

A Chowanoke Family

A Tale of Four Centuries

by Marvin T. Jones

A good, and longtime friend, Andre Simmons, offered to take my daughter and me for a ride on the Chowan. We left the truck and trailer at Castelloe's Landing on the Hertford County side and motored downriver to Bennett's Creek on the Gates County side. My cousin, Ronald Robbins, and his son visited Bennett's creek by boat a few years earlier. Around the same time, another Robbins cousin, Jewel Brown Mitchell, visited that area by car.

We Robbinses have been living in Hertford County since the 1870's, but Bennett's Creek was a home for our ancestors long before that.

I was looking forward to my first visit to this ancestral home, and I was pleased to have my daughter with me. Because of mechanical difficulties with the engine on Andre's boat, we had to scratch the plans for a visit to Bennett's Creek. His family rescued us on the Wiccacon River. I'll try to visit Bennett's Creek again.

*Andre Simmons, my daughter
Joyce L. Jones and Miccy on
the way to Bennett's Creek.
Joyce is a ninth-generation
descendant of John Robbins
who lived in the much-reduced
Chowanoke community
in the early and middle 1700's.*



Archaeological evidence shows that the [Chowanoke Indians](#) lived around the mouth of the Wiccacon River as far back as 700 AD. Among their known villages were the Parker's Ferry site, which later was the Meherrin Village of Ramushounuq, and [Chowanoke](#) at the mouth of the Wiccacon. Ralph Lane, venturing from the Roanoke Island Colony, encountered the Chowanoke in 1586. The European guns and diseases reduced the Chowanoke from two thousand to several handfuls in the Bennett's Creek area by 1700. Their remaining leaders had English names. [John Robbins](#) was one of them. From the time of Ralph Lane's expedition until the Civil War, the Bennett's Creek community endured 250 years of survival. John's children raised families under worsening conditions. During a sale of Chowanoke land in 1790, it was written that the Chowanoke men had died, "*leaving a parcel of Indian women, which have mixed with Negroes, and now there are several freemen and women of Mixed blood as aforesaid which have descended from the s[ai]d Indians.*"

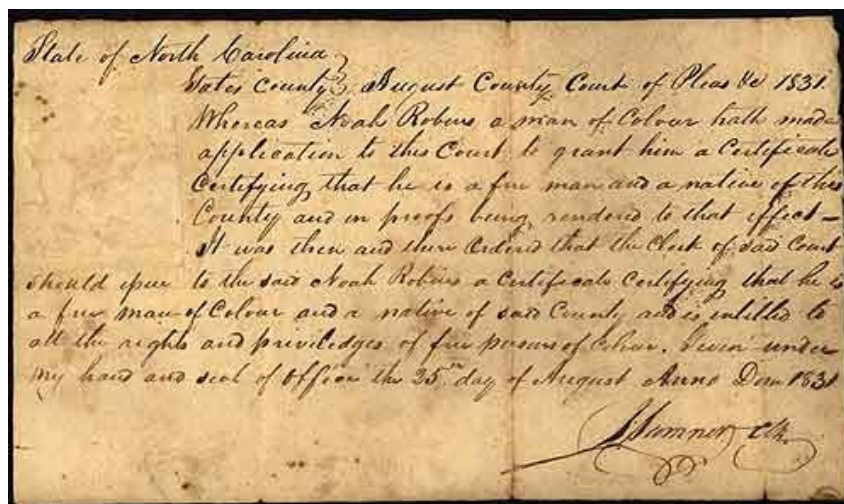
In 1800, Noah Robbins, John's great-grandson was born, and while his life was scarcely better than his parents,' gains were in store for his descendants. The changes he witnessed eventually resulted in a better life for his children and the sons of his brother, also called John Robbins. Noah's patience allowed him a first family from which was born a son, Noah Jr. A school for Indians existed briefly in Gates County – perhaps Noah Jr. and his cousins, Parker David and Augustus, attended. Setbacks continued, however. The Bennett's Creek settlement or reservation was reduced - probably by reclassifying the remaining Chowanokes as Colored so as to negate any

treaties. A further indication of the oppression under which Noah lived is found in an 1831 document that is still in the family. It states that:

“State of North Carolina, Gates County August Court of Pleas, 1831 ...

..It was then and there ordered that the Clerk of said Court should [grant] to the said Noah Robbins a certificate certifying that he is a free man of colour and a native of said County and there in entitled to all rights and privileges of free persons of colour. Given under my hand and seal of office the 25th day of August Anno Dom 1831.”

Noah Robbins was required to have this certificate validating his free status during the 1831 Nat Turner Slave Rebellion. Note the space for the stamp. This document is in possession of one of Noah's descendants.



Why did Noah need this certificate that once bore a stamp? He and his forebears were born free. The answer is found in the date and location of the certificate. It was issued three days after the very famous [Nat Turner Slave Rebellion](#) in neighboring Southampton County. It was required by the Gates County authorities. The white backlash in response to Turner's crusade of freedom was placed on all colored, free and slave.

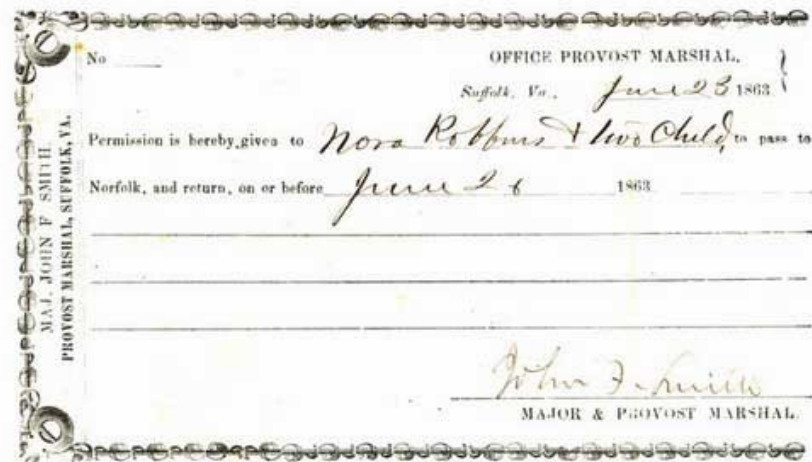
By 1848, Noah, a probable widower, was married to the 22 year-old Susanna Weaver. Andrew Jackson Robbins, known to his descendants as Jack, was their first child. The U.S. Census of 1850 places Noah, Susanna, Noah Jr. and Jack in Bertie County near Colerain. The Robbinses had given up Bennett's Creek, but still lived near the Chowan as Chowanokes always did. But were they still Chowanokes? Officially, the Chowanokes were an extinguished tribe, and perhaps Noah's move signaled the end of the Bennett's Creek community. The Robbinses were now colored and the censuses listed them as mulatto. In the coming decades, this would provide advantages to the family.

The 1860 census showed changes in the Robbins family. Susanna and Noah, Jr. are missing but three more children were added to the family: William, James and Adeline. Also, Noah Sr.'s grown nephews, [Parker David](#) and Augustus Robbins lived nearby. Parker was listed a farmer and mechanic. His wife, Elizabeth Collins, was 19 - they married the year before - and from Hertford County's Pleasant Plains community. Elizabeth's youngest brother, born around the time of the marriage, was named Parker D. Collins. Noah had lost his Chowanoke community, but the next generation was building another one around him in Bertie County.

Not only did the Civil War spread a great overlay on the Robbins family, they in turn played a part in changing the South. Parker and Augustus became non-commissioned officers in the 2nd Colored Calvary and saw action. According to Collins family lore, Elizabeth posed as a man and enlisted in the Union navy. It is more likely that she accompanied Parker and his unit. Elizabeth once told of hearing cannon fire. Many women supported their husbands' units. Elizabeth also had three brothers and a cousin serving the Union.

In 1863, Noah or Noah, Jr., received a pass from the Provost Marshall of the Suffolk district, which was in Union control, to travel with two children. Which Noah was it, and whose children? Hari Jones, the curator of the African-American Civil War Museum in Washington, DC, suggested that one of the Noahs may have been part of a colored espionage network. While writing this story, I visited the Memorial for the first time. I lectured at the Museum, but had not searched for the names of Augustus, Parker and Andrew Jackson Robbins. Under the panel for the 34th Colored Regiment, I was surprised to find the name Noah Robbins next to Jack's! Since the 34th Colored Regiment was organized in Hampton in the following year, it must have been Noah Jr., Jack and one other person that made their way to Union enlistment. We now know that four Robbinses, possibly five with Elizabeth, fought for the expansion of freedom in America.

Travel pass granted to Noah Robbins Jr. in 1863. Within a year Noah and his brother Jack would enlist in the Union Army in Hampton, Virginia.



Jack and Noah Jr. were part of the garrison in Jacksonville, Florida. It is hinted in a 1972 Robbins family tree drawn by Charlie Robbins that Noah Jr. remained in Florida. Shortly after his promotion to corporal in 1866, Jack was honorably discharged. Parker became an active Reconstruction politician and was elected to the North Carolina State Assembly in 1868. Two of his letters to Elizabeth, on official stationery, survive. In one letter, he passes on a request to Jack, or as he is called, Jackson.



Jack Robbins' 1866 promotion to Corporal.

In 1870, Andrew Jackson Robbins's household consisted of his wife, Harriet Hayes, and his younger brother James. Jack was now 22 and had the advantages of the new order. His cousin was now a legislator and another cousin, Augustus, would succeed Parker in the Assembly. The three Robbinses expanded their land holdings in



Sergeant-Major Parker David Robbins.

Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina State Museum of History

Bertie County.

[Parker Robbins](#) kept adding more titles to his career. Up the road from Colerain, Parker was appointed postmaster of Harrellsville in 1874. While there, he was granted two patents, one was a cultivator. His marriage to Elizabeth was disintegrating and he was living with a white woman. His term in Harrellsville ended along with Reconstruction in 1876 – it was also the year of his last patent for a saw-sharpening machine. He and Elizabeth divorced in 1884. A few years later, she remarried and lived as Elizabeth Melton in Winton until her death in 1927.

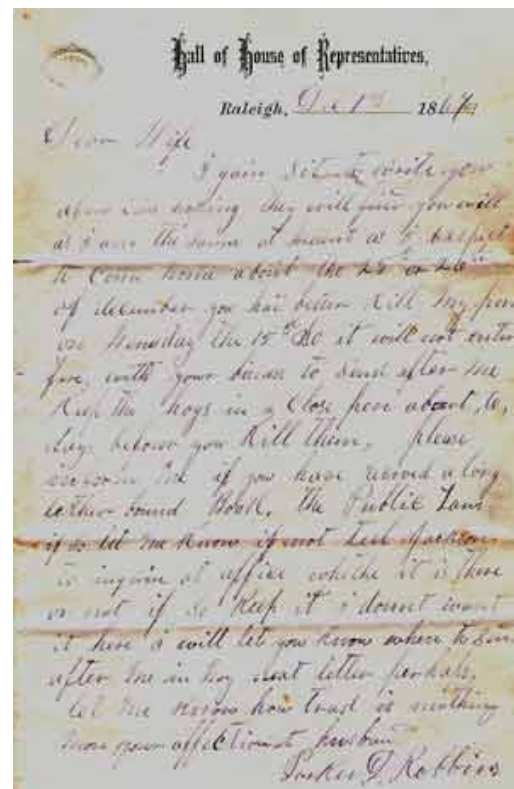
Parker moved to Magnolia, in Duplin County, remarried and became a father at 54 years old. With the sawmill he owned, Parker built two homes (one is still standing). He constructed and operated his own steamboat, the St. Peter, on the Cape Fear River. In 1917, Parker David Robbins passed and was buried in Magnolia. Augustus remained in Bertie County, owned a store and lived into the 1920's.



Andrew Jackson "Jack" Robbins, probably in the 1880's. Jack was as stern as he looked. His son Columbus, frustrated at Jack's dominance, walked out of the fields and left the farm. Columbus never lived there again.

Photograph courtesy of Curtis and Carolyn Winson

Jack and Harriet's first son was born in 1871. He was named Parker



Parker David Robbins's letter to his wife, Elizabeth Collins Robbins, dated December 1, 1869. Written on N.C. House of Representatives stationery, he conveys his affection for Elizabeth and asks her to "Keep the hogs in a close pen about 6 days before you kill them..."

His cousin Jack is mentioned: "please inform me if you have received a large leather bound book, the Public Laws, if so let me know, if not tell Jackson to inquire at the office whether it is there..."

Letter courtesy of Lewis Parker Robbins



Parker David Robbins house in Magnolia, North Carolina.

David Robbins, and I am his youngest grandchild. Harriet died around 1881 after giving birth to her seventh child, and Jack buried her in the Harrellsville Missionary Chapel Cemetery. The Church later expanded over her grave and she lies under the 1917 Church building. Ever busy and in short order, Jack married Molly Reynolds, a Meherrin from Hertford County.

Jack probably met Molly when he bought a large farm in the Hertford County community of Brantley's Grove. The purchase of this farm was part of the expansion of land ownership by free-born people of color that extended from the Pleasant Plains, California and Oak Villa communities into Winton, Ahoskie, Cofield and Archertown. The people of Meherrin, Chowanoke, White and African descent now had large multi-community settlements in the center of Hertford County.



Molly Reynolds Robbins and her step-son, Andrew Robbins.

*They both died in 1896.
Courtesy of Benjamin Gary Robbins*

Molly and AJ had seven children. I was lucky to have known the youngest two, Benny and Susan - called Susie. Susie was the first to attend college. At Elizabeth City Teachers College, she met her cousin Lillie, the daughter of Jack's brother, James. Shortly after or during Susie's birth, her mother Molly died in September, 1896. Within 3 months, Jack married Susan Victoria Archer who cared for Susie before she could crawl. By this time, Jack's first set of children were grown or nearly so. The oldest of them, Parker, (my grandfather - named after Jack's cousin) and his sister Kate, lived either on the farm or nearby.



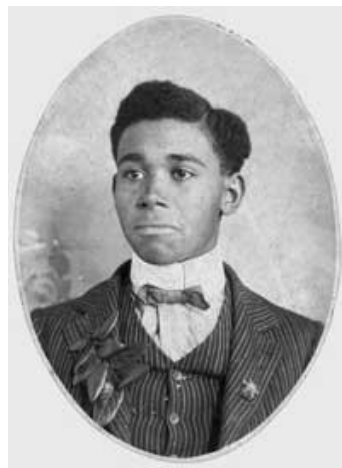
Parker D. Robbins grave in Magnolia.



*Jack, Charlie and Susan Robbins
in 1899.*

Photograph courtesy of Curtis and Carolyn Winson

His father's overbearing insistence on order and hard work caused Columbus Robbins to leave home. Year's later, an old friend once told Columbus' baby brother, "I haven't seen him in years." Clayton Robbins responded, "Well, you're better off than me. I've never met him."



Jack had well settled into his community. Some children were tutored at the large I-frame home that replaced the farm's original house. His younger children attended Waters Training School in Winton, and Jack was a deacon at Cofield's Phillipi Baptist Church. His descendants were still in attendance a century later.

The third set of children of Robbins children grew up. Our Uncle Charlie attended Shaw University, operated farms, owned a store and a dry cleaners in Ahoskie. You can find his name on the dedication marker of the Atlantic District Fair's main building. In the hundred or so times that I saw him, he always looked at me with an accepting smile. I always knew I was one of his own.

In 1903, Susan Victoria gave birth to a second son, Clayton Asa. A few months later, Jack, at 55 years old, died in Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Susan Victoria Archer Robbins divided the farm among some of her oldest stepchildren and raised several of the youngest. She and the younger Parker sent Susie to teachers college. Once Susie married and settled in New Jersey, her home provided comfort for many visiting Robbinses. Several great-nieces spent summers with her. Despite there being three sets of children, there was obviously an extensive cooperation among them that reached well into the new century. Now, in this third century, Robbinses still own parts of the farm.

Ironies of the Robbins farm surfaced long after Jack's death. In the early 1950's, when the Ahoskie-Cofield Road was being widened and paved, my brother Douglas and a friend found Chowanoke artifacts, mainly arrowheads and spearheads, in what must have been a cache. Nearby, Flat Swamp, a tributary of the Wiccacon, runs thru the Robbins property. Recently, human remains were found on the farm. It is likely that the Chowanoke traveled up the creek and pioneered that part of the road.



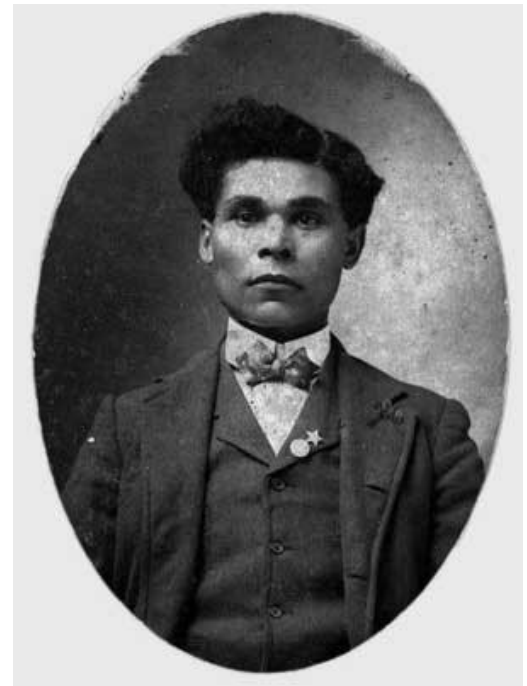
*Marvis Jones and Susie Robbins, circa 1914. Susie gave this photograph to her brother, Parker David (younger) who helped send her to college in Elizabeth City.
Courtesy of T.W. Jones*



*Probably taken around 1918 when he was in college, Charlie Robbins with his mother, Susan Victoria Archer Robbins at the home.
Courtesy of Curtis and Carolyn Winson*



Jeannie Dilday holds a Chowanoke spearpoint that her late husband found on the Robbins farm. The Dildays bought the home of Royal Archer, a grandson of Jack and Molly Robbins.



*Parker David Robbins (younger), Jack and Harriet's first son, named after Jack's prominent famous cousin.
Courtesy of E. Lavene Jones*

From 1980 to 1990, I visited my great uncle Clayton often when passing through Petersburg. He was the youngest of Jack's 16 children, and was the last one alive. His life was worldly, having gone from Brantley's grove to Shaw University, Howard University Medical School and, finally, to a long practice in the Petersburg-Hopewell, Virginia area. I queried him much about his travels and past, but I could never ask enough.

Clayton once told me of when my grandfather, the younger Parker, asked Clayton to visit. Parker was 32 years older than his youngest half-brother and lived through all of the family's births and deaths. He helped his father and two stepmothers raise the many children. Now, the youngest, Clayton, had become a successful man who had never known the hunger or want that Jack and Noah must have had. Clayton followed Parker to the smokehouse where Parker handed Clayton a ham. "I just want you to have this." Parker said.

Clayton sold the homestead around 1982 and moved Jack and Susan Victoria's remains to the Cemetery of Phillipi Baptist Church. Jack and the choice of his youth, Harriet, while not buried together, are now at least on Highway 45.

Twice, Uncle Clayton's gestures touched me in everlasting ways. One was on the eve of my and Carol's wedding. The rehearsal dinner ended, and I left the others to pickup something – maybe it was the tuxedo - from my nearby studio office. Although, I was completely occupied with wedding and related event plans, I was somehow feeling a bit of physical and mental isolation (premarital jitters?). The phone rang and it was Uncle Clayton. I knew he was not able to come. He was 85 years old, and had Aunt Gwen, his wife, to attend for both of them. But, he called because he wanted to me to know he cared for me and wanted me to have a happy wedding and marriage. It was the only phone call or note I ever received from him.

Then again, maybe there was another note of sorts. Two years, later I served as one of Uncle Clayton's pallbearers in Petersburg. Aunt



Clayton and Eunice Robbins, circa 1961. Clayton received his Waters Training School diploma from Dr. Calvin Scott Brown in 1921.

A decade later, he married Eunice, Dr. Brown's daughter. I always marvelled at Aunt Eunice's "devil's peak." I was later told that she painted it in.

Courtesy of Kaaren Ragland & Marvin T. Jones

Gwen held the repast at the house I had known all of my life. She took me away from family and friends to the bedroom that was now only hers. Aunt Gwen placed in my hands Uncle Clayton's best watch. It was purchased in Europe before I was born and was the kind of watch that successful doctors own. He just wanted me to have it. That was Clayton Robbins' last message to me.

I now get my feeling of Robbins' spirit from the many descendants of Jack Robbins as well as those of his brother James. We've given each other a lot of understanding. The story I just recounted is one I wish I could have shared with my late mother, Pearlene Clario Robbins Jones, the daughter of the younger Parker David Robbins.

My deepest thanks for helping me collect the information for this article go to all of my Robbins cousins, especially Carolyn and Curtis Winston, Jewel Brown Mitchell, Ronald Robbins, Lewis Robbins, Benjamin Gary Robbins, Ireatha Harris, Kaaren Ragland and Paula Sanderlin. I have enduring appreciation for the work of genealogist Barbara Archer Gregory (a cousin from another branch of my family), Rodney Barfield formerly of the North Carolina State Museum of History, the late Dr. Tom Parramore, Hari Jones of the African-American Civil War Museum, and Paul Heinegg who is the author of Free African-Americans.

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