



Peter Oliver learns pottery in Old Salem's "Between Two Masters" video.

Submitted photos

## Historic enslaved potter Peter Oliver of Old Salem has an enduring legacy

BY TODD LUCK  
THE CHRONICLE

Peter Oliver's dramatic story of being a local Moravian slave who learned pottery and purchased his own freedom is still remembered today, by historical experts and his descendants.

Oliver's skill and contributions to history were noted in "Peter Oliver: Life of a Black Moravian Craftsman" by historian Jon Sensbach.

"Moravian pottery is today regarded as among the best in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, a legacy in which Peter Oliver played a substantial part," wrote Sensbach, a University of Florida history professor.

Many Forsyth County natives can trace their lineage to Oliver, including basketball star Chris Paul.

One of Oliver's descendants is Raymond Oliver, a retired local dentist. He said a decade ago he was contacted by Mel White, a historian with Old Salem, who had traced Peter Oliver's lineage to his modern descendants. Meetings were held, and 50 descendants attended and were given genealogical information about their connection to Peter Oliver. Reunions of descendants are still regularly held.

Raymond Oliver said he didn't waste any time producing a play in 2005 on his noted ancestor, "The Peter Oliver Story," which drew a full house.

"If he could accomplish all he did under the time and circumstances that he found himself, we should be encouraged to do more, since we have so many opportunities available to us now," he said.

Peter Oliver is also remembered at Old Salem Museums & Gardens, which features the restored historic town of Salem, where he spent many years of his life. In 2010, Old Salem held a service for the 200th anniversary of his death. He's featured during the African American Heritage Tour at Old Salem and is even featured in the tour's video "Between Two Masters."

Cheryl Harry, Old



Peter cleans up in Old Salem's "Between Two Masters" video.

Salem's director of African-American programming, said that Peter Oliver was an example of the many educated and skilled artisans who were slaves. She said he was well regarded in the church, too.

"He was a beloved member of the Moravian community," she said.

Peter Oliver was born on May 10, 1766, in Virginia. During his early years he was simply known as "Oliver." He came to Wachovia as an enslaved adolescent. In July 1785, the Single Brother House in Salem, where unmarried Moravian men stayed, took over his lease. He worked in the house's kitchen, garden and craft shop. The house purchased him in 1786 and he was baptized and given the Christian name "Peter."

Slaves at the time worshiped alongside their white brethren in the Moravian Church and were addressed as "brother" and "sister." The Moravian Church expected slaves to be obedient and, in exchange, masters were expected to treat them humanely.

"During that time, when Peter Oliver joined the church, Moravians

believed that everybody was equal spiritually, so once you joined the church you were a full-fledged member of the congregation," Harry said.

Slaves like Oliver would learn to write and read both English and German. Slaves would use the church's rules to have more say in how they were bought and sold, allowing Oliver to negotiate how he was sold and to whom.

In 1788, he moved to Bethabara when he was purchased by Moravian master potter Rudolph Christ, who taught him the trade.

When Christ moved back to Salem, Oliver remained in Bethabara with a new master, potter Gottlob Krause. He worked there until 1796, when he returned to Salem to work for Christ again.

Moravian records showed his pottery skills made his value as a slave

increase.

He purchased his own freedom by 1800. In 1802, he married a free mulatto woman working in Salem named Christina Bass, and they had six children.

He rented a four-acre plot of land just north of town.

Because of the fear of a slave revolt, stipulations were put on him that no one other than his family could live in the house, and that he report any conspiracy involving blacks against citizens or the county.

Oliver continued to be a potter, supporting his family through the sale of pottery and farming.

He died of illness on Sept. 28, 1810.

He was buried in God's Acre with a men's choir. He was the last African-American buried there.

Over the next decade, the Moravian church started to have blacks worship separately, leading to the creation of St Phillips Moravian Church in 1822, which had its own graveyard for African-Americans.

While Moravian pottery from the era has survived, which specific pieces Peter Oliver did has never been determined.



R. Oliver

## Don't forget history in N.C.

BY LENWOOD G. DAVIS  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Since this is Black History Month, we celebrate the achievements made by African Americans such as: Crispus Attucks, Benjamin Benneker, Richard Allen, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Maggie Lena Walker, Madame C.J. Walker, A. Phillip Randolph, Paul Roberson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charles Drew, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Colin Powell and many others that are too numerous to name.

While we acknowledge the above individuals, we sometimes forget that a number of African-Americans from North Carolina should also be recognized.

They include the following:

**Simon Green Atkins** was born in Haywood in 1863 and graduated from St. Augustine Normal Institute (now St. Augustine College) in Raleigh. In 1892 he founded the Slater Industrial Academy (now Winston-Salem State University) and he became its first president. In 1925, Winston-Salem Teachers College, now WSSU, became the first African-American institution in the United States to grant degrees for teaching in the elementary grades.

In 1881 Israel Clement was elected to the Winston (now Winston-Salem) town Commission. Although Clement was the first African-American town commissioner, at least eight other Blacks were also elected to that body.

**John Chavis** was born free in Oxford in 1763 and became an educator and minister. He also fought in the American Revolution War. Between 1808 and 1835 he owned and operated a private school in Raleigh for both African-Americans and Whites.

After **Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831**, African-Americans were prohibited from being taught how to read or write. Rev. Chavis did, however, continue to teach White children. Several of the White students were from prominent families. North Carolina's Chief Justice Henderson's two sons, Archibald and John, as well as Willie P. Mangum, who later became a U.S. senator, and Charles Manley, who later became governor of North Carolina, were among the students at Chavis's school.

**John Stanly** was born a slave in 1775 in New Bern. After being a slave for 23 years, he was freed by an act of legislation in 1798. Stanly was a barber, land owner, businessman and slave owner. Through wise investments in property and other business ventures, it was said that he was one of the wealthiest men in Craven County, African-American or White. Over the year he freed at least 23 slaves, including his wife and children.

**Lunsford Lane** was a slave from Raleigh, born in 1803. He made a special type of blend of smoking tobacco during the early 1830s. Lane also invented a type of pipe for his special blend of tobacco. In 1835 Lane had earned enough money to purchase his freedom. He later became an abolitionist.

**Harriet Ann Jacobs** was a slave born in 1813 in Edenton. She escaped to freedom in 1842. In 1861 she published a book under the pseudonym Linda Brent. It was titled, "Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl." This was the first autobiographical narrative written by a female slave from North Carolina.

**James Walker Hood** was born free in 1831, in Chester County, Pennsylvania. In 1863, Hood came to North Carolina as a missionary and it was said that during his stay, over 500 churches were erected under his supervision. In 1869, he became the first African-American assistant superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of North Carolina. Rev. Hood was consecrated a Bishop of the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1872. In 1884, he edited "The Negro in The Christian Pulpit," the first book of sermons published by an African-American Methodist Minister.

**Harde Spears** was born in Snow Hill and was the first known African-American in North Carolina to receive a patent for his invention. In 1870 he was given a patent for an "Improvement in Portable Shields for Infantry and Artillery." This invention was the forerunner of our modern-day tank.

**Warren Clay Coleman** was born a slave in 1849 in Concord. After slavery he opened a barbershop and a general store. In a matter of years, he acquired substantial property in Cabarrus County and became one of the wealthiest men, African American or White, in the area and in the South.

There are hundreds of notable African-Americans in North Carolina that are not mentioned in this article due to limitation of space. I must, however, list some of them because they had a major impact on society: Elreta M. Alexander, Romare Bearden, Daniel Blue, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Robert J. Brown, Selma Burke, Julius L. Chambers, John C. Dancy, Thomas Day, Helen G. Edmonds, Henry Evans, Henry D. Frye, Harvey Gantt, Annie Wealthy Holland, Larry Womble, Charles H. Hunter, Edward A. Johnson, George Black, Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, Howard Lee, Clarence E. Lightner, John Merrick, Henry (Mickey) Michaux, Jr., Aaron M. Moore, Berry O'Kelly, William G. Pearson, Lawson A. Scruggs, James F. Shober, Asa T. Spaulding, Charles C. Spaulding, David Walker, Leroy T. Walker, William J. Walls, John H. Wheeler, James Young, Clarence "Big House" Gaines, Roland Hayes and many more.

During Black History Month, we celebrate the achievements and accomplishments of African-Americans all across the United States, let us also acknowledge the contributions that African Americans from North Carolina have made to society.

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of the month



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