

Free Negroes Important Element in Ante Bellum Hertford Life

Significant in the sociological annals of North Carolina is the story of Hertford County's pre-Civil War free negro population.

From the turn of the 19th century until the Civil War made all negroes free, Hertford County had one of the largest populations of free persons of color in the state.

Percentage-wise, the county's free nonwhite population ran from eight to 12 per cent, one of the largest percentages in the state.

Veiled in obscurity is the story of how many of these people became free. Many of them were mixed-breed people, some even claiming ancestry from the early Indian tribes which roamed the area of the county.

Others, of course, were illegitimate offspring of white-black liaisons. The greatest percentage of free negroes in Hertford have the lighter skin of people with a large strain of white ancestry.

When the first federal census was taken in Hertford in 1790, there were 216 free persons of color in a population that included 3,170 whites and 2,442 slaves.

Other counties which had significant populations of free negroes included Pasquotank and Halifax.

Northampton and Bertie also had many free persons of color.

Fast Growth
Within ten years, Hertford County had over 300 free negroes, and in 1830, the county's free negro population was more than 900.

Only Craven and Pasquotank counties had larger populations than Hertford in this year.

Why the large increase? This period between the Revolutionary War and about 1831 was the golden era for the southern free negro. The trend was toward freedom for all negroes.

But the coming of the cotton boom, caused by the invention of the gin, doomed this trend.

By 1830, cotton was becoming king and the need for field hands smothered this early move toward freedom for negroes.

While the increase in Hertford's free negro population from 216 in 1790 to over nine hundred 40 years later is told partly in terms of natural growth, it is also evident that many former slaves became free during this period.

One explanation for this is the fact that during this period, a significant population of white Quakers lived in Hertford and Gates counties. These strongly religious people were opposed to

slavery and many freed their slaves during this liberal period.

At any rate, the population figures show that in this liberal period of the early republic, Hertford's free negro population grew significantly, out of proportion to the growth of the population generally.

While the free negro population of the county was undergoing a fourfold increase, the total population of the county grew only by something over 50 per cent.

New Attitude
After 1830, and especially after 1835, the trend was toward a more conservative attitude on the part of southern whites toward the colored population.

Until the new North Carolina Constitution of 1835, free negroes were entitled to vote if they could meet usual property qualifications.

During the Convention of 1835, Hertford delegates reported that there were 150 free negro voters in Hertford County.

At this famous Convention, an inkling of what Hertford County whites thought of the county's big free negro population is the fact that Kenneth Rayner of Hertford, a young attorney and a leader in the Convention, made a speech opposing the disfranchisement of free negroes in the new Constitution.

During the next 30 years, until the Civil War began, Hertford's free negro population remained about constant, never dropping below 900 and totaling 1,112 in 1860.

During this period, the Hertford County free negro population settled down in sections of the county which remain today heavily populated with descendants of these families.

"Archertown," the section around present-day Co-field, became a center of free negro life in Hertford. Four different families of Archers were listed in the 1790 census, and by 1860, better than a tenth of the entire free negro population bore the name Archer.

"Sally Archer's Crossroads" was the name of the busy rural corner now known as Co-field. There, a community of free negroes lived. Many of the members of the community owned farms and property. Many worked as hands in turpentine and tar operations

which took wealth from the big pine forests of the region.

Sally Archer's store at the Crossroads was one of the few negroes of the county owned by the freeman.

An explanation for many of the free persons of color in the early years is the fact that during this period, white slaveowners sometimes gave freedom to older slaves who were no longer able to work as field hands.

Thus, in the 1790 census, many free negroes were listed in the households of whites. Of 60 free negro notations in the 1790 census, 29 were groups of free persons listed in the households of whites, 31 were free negro family names.

geographical locations named for negroes which appeared on maps of the ante bellum period.

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This custom gradually changed during the coming years, until by the time of the Civil War, a majority of the free negroes lived apart from white households.

However, many free negro children became apprentices and indentured servants in white households during this period.

Because of stringent laws, about the only way a free negro youngster could gain any kind of training during the 1830-60 period was to become an apprentice or indentured servant.

What was the work of these free negroes? Most of them were farm and forest workers, as were their white neighbors.

Fourteen free negro families in Hertford in 1860 owned farms. Eighty free negro families owned land of some sort.

In 1860, of 305 free negroes listed in occupational classes, 144 were listed as "common laborers."

During this period, laws gradually tightened on free negroes. They were forbidden to trade, traffic or meet with slaves. They were restricted in travel outside the county. They were usually forbidden education.

However, that some of the county's free negroes managed to get an education is indicated by the fact that Pleasant Plains Church, an all free negro church, was formed in 1851 by men who undoubtedly knew reading and writing.

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Church Had White Pastors Until 1870's

Pleasant Plains Pioneer Church For Free Negroes; Begun in 1851

A body of people unique in the annals of Hertford County, and the South were the free-born persons of French, Indian and Negro blood whose descendants are found today primarily in the nine miles between Ahoskie and Winton.

The various racial mixtures varied—some had no Negro blood—but in general the result was evidenced in very light skin, dark or reddish hair which tended to be straight, high cheekbones and aquiline nose.

Most of this group, in the days before the Civil War, had moved to the south central section of the county from the district around Mt. Tabor Baptist Church. They were people of independent means, primarily farmers, who owned their land and homes.

They had in their own right, however, no church or school. They attended white churches and held prayer meetings in various homes, and some of their children attended the few white schools in the area.

In that year, the idea of organizing a church was discussed in a meeting held in a house on the Jacob Taylor farm, now owned by Sherman Hall, about four miles west of Winton.

From this meeting, a group was selected to petition for permission to organize a church, which was granted with the provision that slaves and their descendants would not be permitted to join for fear they might be encouraged to rebel.

It was this proviso with the land for the church site, sold by James Williams for \$10, which gave birth to the misinterpretation that the church was for "light colored" people only.

No person was barred because of his color, but only on the basis of his being of free-born descent.

On December 5, 1851, four white Baptist ministers met with the congregation to form the Pleasant Plains Baptist Church. The Revs. James Delk, John Nowell, Thomas Hoggard and William P. Britton, Jr., were all ministers of various Baptist churches which the people had been attending.

First Meeting
The minutes of the first meeting state: "After due consultation, together with such preliminary exercises as the occasion required, Elders Delk, Nowell, Hoggard and Britton proceeded to organize, set in order and constitute the following persons in a gospel church, known as the 'Free Colored Baptist Church,' worshipping at Pleasant Plains . . . namely: Jesse Keene, William Hall, William Nickens, John Bizzell, Napoleon Boone, John Reid, Wiley Jones, Lawrence Weaver, William H. Hall, Solomon Keene, William Jones, Richard Weaver, James Reynolds, John H. Keene, Sarah Hall, Eliza Manley, Martha Lewton, Elizabeth Bizzell, Louisa Keene, Mary Jane Wiggins, Elizabeth Lang, Sarah Weaver, Fereby Keene, Martha Boone, Bela Hall, Eliza Jane Boone, Mary Ann Hall, Sarah Manley Jane Sears, Sally Nickens."

Jesse Keene and William Hall were chosen deacons, and Lawrence Weaver was elected church clerk.

The Rev. Thomas Hoggard was called as first pastor and served through 1875. During his service, the first church was built and the first colored school in the county was built on the church ground.

Sunday School, in which the literature was a blue-back spelling book and the Bible, from which some members learned to read and write, was started in the late fifties.

The Rev. Hershey Parker followed Hoggard, and the church was remodeled during his term, 1875-1881.

He was succeeded by the Rev. C. F. Barber, and the Rev. T. M. Collins, a member of the church. Collins was the first colored minister to serve Pleasant Plains.

At his death in 1927, Norman Hall left \$500 for the church, provided a brick building was erected within five years after his

death. His brother, T. B. Hall, also said he would give another \$500 and 20,000 bricks in memory of his late wife.

Although the new building was not erected, under the pastorate of the Rev. W. C. Somerville from 1929 to 1935, the new plot of land was cleared and used as a

community playground. Renovation plans for the old building did not come to fruition under Somerville or the Rev. Moses Newsome, who served until 1941.

Plans were renewed, however, when Dr. Watkins again served as pastor from 1942 through 1947.

See CHURCH, Page 7

We've Been Keeping Store Since 1912

Our Town and Our County have both grown and changed a lot since we opened our doors 47 years ago. We have been kept busy taking care of the clothing needs of the citizens of the Roanoke-Chowan but we are never too busy to stop and say THANK YOU to each and everyone for their confidence and patronage through the years.

Abe Feldman, Prop.



The Men's Store

We offer nationally advertised Clothing and Furnishings for Men and Young Men. Whether you are looking for a Suit, Sport Coat, Shirt or just a Tie Bar you will find a complete selection at the Men's Store. We are proud of the clothing values we offer.

Our Motto: We Combine Quality With Popular Prices and Friendly Service



The Fashion Shop

Quality Wearing Apparel for the ladies of the Roanoke-Chowan. We are proving every day that Quality need not be expensive. You will find the very latest styles in Women's Fashions . . . Moderately Priced.

Famous Families Can Trace Long Ancestry

Last names that still sign checks in 20th century Hertford County were on the first census roll ever taken in the county in 1790.

And that goes for the county's Negro population, too.

In that year, 216 free negroes were listed in Hertford County, along with 2,442 slaves and 3,170 white people.

While the names of the slaves are not listed, the names of Hertford's pioneer free negro families are indicated in the census. The census list is in a form which lists the names of "heads of families," with children, women, slaves, and free negroes listed as numbers after the "head of the family."

In this listing 31 free negro "