

Butler Family History

During and after slavery, stories, songs and other forms of oral history were crucial in preserving family memories and knowledge especially when written records were scarce or unavailable.

The devastation caused by slavery included family separations, the denial of surnames, and presented significant challenges to tracing family history. Despite these obstacles, individuals found ways to maintain and pass down their family histories.

We are blessed that these efforts were accomplished in our family providing us with a historical account of the lives of our great grandfather, Isham Butler (1839-1930) and his older brother, Blaney Butler (1828-1917). Their stories were preserved by our cousin, Ms. Tera Culbreth (1926-2020) in 1984 as she prepared for the Snow Hill Missionary Baptist Church Annual Homecoming. During the same year, a similar history was written for the Blaney Butler's Annual Family Reunion at the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church of Clinton. You'll notice that there're differences in the two written histories which were passed down from generation to generation verbally. These differences are expected, and I'll point some of them out in my summary comments.

Excerpts from the Snow Hill Missionary Baptist Church Homecoming Report-Church History (Summer of 1984)

The history of Snow Hill Church and community goes back before this was a free country. Although all legal documents of its origin cannot be found, the ancestors passed this valuable information to their families. The families seeing a need to obtain this information began to keep record of dates and events that took place in the church and community. It is told that the present day Snow Hill originated from the son of a slave. His name was Isham Herring. Isham also had a brother named Blaney Herring. Before becoming free men their names were changed to Butler, after their slave master that they served. Little is known of their biological father and very little know about their mother. The boys were cared for by their grandfather.

Their grandfather, along with their mother, lived on the bank of the Cape Fear River in a little cave. This cave served as a carpenter's shop and in the back, completely out of sight, was their living quarters. Their grandfather feared that the boys would be discovered, since no one knew they had been born, so he kept them hidden in the back of the cave. He only let them play when he thought it was safe. He taught them a song to sing if someone was coming, and it went like this; "Mr. Bell is a coming...Mr. Bell is coming." The boys were taken into the back of the cave for safety.

The mother, wanting to be free, fled with the Underground Railroad, leaving the boys behind. Shortly after she left, President Lincoln freed all slaves (January 1, 1863-Emancipation Proclamation). The boys and grandfather remained in the cave until the boys were young men (Civil War ends April 9, 1865).

Post Civil War and during 1865, Isham would've been 26 years old and Blaney 37 years old. They left their cave carrying a few of the tools that belonged to their grandfather, knowledge of carpentry and \$1.00 each. They set out to make a life for themselves. Their travels led them to a town called Salemburg. This town was flourishing with people both black and white. Business and trading was good in this area. It is said that a wealthy white lady, by the name of Mrs. Faircloth, sold the boys some land for the price of 25 cents per acre. Isham and Blaney purchased a total of eight (8) acres at that time. The land was located near Bearskin Swamp. Blaney decided that he wanted his land on the other side of the swamp and so he settled there. Today, it is known as Mount Pleasant. While Isham, seeing the hills covered with sand, decided that he wanted to settle there. The sand was so white that it looked like snow, so he called it Snow Hill. Snow Hill was established before Roseboro. During this time Roseboro was just a mass of flat land.

By this time people were sharecroppers and worked at various jobs to support their families. There was little money to be made by blacks. Hearing of the two brothers that had already purchased land inspired others to begin saving what little money they could. When they managed to save 25 cents, they would give it to Isham or Blaney to purchase land for them. Although the slaves were free, certain things they could not buy and land was one of them. It is said that in all total the brothers purchased over three hundred acres of land. The land was divided between the buyers, the Butlers, Tatums, Parkers and the Culbreths.

Using what trades and abilities they had, the brothers and land owners, set forth to establish a strong Christian community. Just prior to 1887, these families in the circular area of the Snow Hill community realized that they needed a place to worship. They immediately set forth to make a dream a reality. In their efforts to accomplish this dream, they constructed a bush shelter while concentrating on the log cabin that they would build. This also became a reality and services were held there until the earthquake in 1887.

Excerpts from the Blaney Butler's Annual Family Reunion at the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church of Clinton (August 5, 1984)

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" These words are found in Psalms 27. Certainly, our forefathers used the Bible as their road map while on their pilgrim journey. The road was not easy, but they fought for their freedom from slavery. Many were desperate for their freedom that some would drastically take liberty of death. "When evil men come to destroy me, they will stumble and fall! Yes, though a mighty army marches against me, my heart shall know no fear! I am confident that God will save me"!

Surely these words must have been spoken by our ancestors. Can you imagine the heartache and tears that were shed when children were forcefully separated from their families? Their suffering and perseverance provided the opportunity for us to enjoy the lifestyle that we now take for granted.

Unfortunately very little is known about our "Roots" prior to the early 1800's. Our facts reveal that two young boys, Blaney and Isham Herring were brought to this area by their slave master. Their mother kept them in a cave because she feared that they might be sold. They grew to be men who were freed from slavery when the Emancipation Proclamation became effective. Upon being released from bondage, Isham and Blaney received a tract of land from their former owner; Mr. Butler. In order to register the land legally, the Herring men assumed the surname of Mr. Butler. Thus we consider our surname to be "Butler" rather than Herring."

The Butler brothers were not impatient, but brave, stouthearted and courageous. They waited on the Lord. They worked long hours to earn money to purchase additional land, which they left as a legacy to their children. Isham settled in the area known as Snow Hill, while Blaney settled in our Mount Pleasant community. Throughout their struggles, I am sure they said, "There's a bright side somewhere!"

The descendants of Blaney and Isham Butler are many in number. We have grown in strength and volume since those two small boys were "owned" by the Butler plantation. We are continuing to reap the harvest of our forefathers and our residences extend far beyond the Sampson County boundary.

Summary Comments

After reading these excerpts, you may have recognized that the two stories are told with some similar historical facts and that some facts are very different and seemingly incongruent. For example, Isham's story of their first land purchase was because a white lady 'Ms. Faircloth' sold them land for 25 cents an acre. Blaney's story states that their former slave owner 'Mr. Butler' gave them a tract of land and for that reason they changed their surname from Herring to Butler. Which story is correct?

One story suggest that the 'boys' left the cave when President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. It's highly unlikely that they would have left at that time, as the Civil War continued until April 9, 1865. This would have surely given them 'hope' of freedom but not enough to risk being enslaved.

Recognize that North Carolina was a confederate state and they obviously didn't recognize anything issued by Lincoln.

I can also proclaim that Isham and Blaney were not 'boys' when they left the cave assuming that they did at the end of the Civil War 1865. Based on our recent research on their tombstones, Isham was born in 1839 and Blaney in 1828. That would have made them 26 and 37 years of age at that time. I also found a discrepancy in Isham's date of birth as reported on his death certificate (1840) versus his tombstone (1839).

Isham's story reported that a significant earthquake occurred that affected Snow Hill in 1887. A Google search states that the earthquake occurred in 1886. Not a big difference at all! It appears that the earthquake nearly demolished the modest building that Isham and the community initially constructed for worship.

Most, if not all of these questions and facts cannot be answered and are a byproduct of the evils of the institution of slavery. Today, MAGA Republicans want that history to be deleted and suggest that slavery had its benefits for African Americans! You may also question things like their mother's name, how could she leave her boys for the Underground Railroad, their father's name and his whereabouts, their grandfather's name, etc.

It's my perspective that these documents, whether discrepancies or not, provide some basic facts that appear to be truthful. I think we're blessed to have this information giving our children a solid look into the past and the challenges that they faced that even affect us today. Almost any news today, from the Trump Administration, presents us with additional challenges that we must fight for.

From that point of view, I met with an highly accomplished artist (Margaret Huddy) to review our family history and to record it in a way that we can be proud of. Over several meetings, we focused on the facts that Isham and Blaney were raised in a

cave in the Cape Fear River area near Fayetteville, NC by their grandfather, a carpenter. We also reviewed a copy of a 1906 Land Deed in which Isham and his wife, Mary Armency, purchased additional land in Snow Hill. Unable to write their names, they both used the standard 'X' to represent their signatures, highlighting the fact that slavery denied them a basic education. In the art we developed a vision of what it must have been like for them to hear of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It's possible that from their cave they had a glimpse of hope that that their freedom was possible but not yet attainable until the Civil War ended nearly two years later. Dark clouds with a bit of sun shining in the art represents those assumed feelings.

I can share this art (see below) with any family member that would like a 13"x17" print to display in their home; if so simply contact me.

Faith & Hope by Margaret Huddy



This photo of Isham's tombstone was taken by my daughter Dr. Serena Butler-Johnson on June 7, 2025 at the old Snow Hill community cemetery. Please note that its very challenging to get to the cemetery as the trees and natural vegetation has overtaken it! We were escorted by our cousin MacArthur Culbreth who painstakingly directed us into the cemetery and easily lost our directional bearings as we tried to exit it. It should be noted that church and community members 'cleaned up' the cemetery several years ago; however, it did not provide a permanent access walking trail. At some point, it would be worthwhile to hire a contractor, using heavy landscape equipment to accomplish this goal. Of course, that would take significant coordination, leadership and money. and money.

