

Early History of the Bishop Family of Roxobel and Rich Square, North Carolina

Samuel Bishop, the earliest documented African American Bishop ancestor, was a slave on the Oakland plantation of William Wiley Bishop, in the town of Roxobel, Bertie County, North Carolina. Samuel was born about 1834. Patrilineal DNA testing indicates his African origins were in the Ibo population of Nigeria. Samuel's family consisted of three sons born into slavery, David Bishop, born 1852, Byrd Bishop, born 1851, and Andrew Bishop, whose birth date is unknown. We do not know the identity of the mother of Samuel's children. Samuel had a stepson born about 1847, who took the name Exum Capeheart (Axom Kapot). On Exum's death certificate, the informant appears to indicate Alanson Capeheart, a white Roxobel merchant, as Exum's father. The identity of Exum's mother is unknown.

The Roxobel farm of William Wiley Bishop was named Oakland after a grove of oak trees that sheltered the plantation house from the Halifax Road, now Governor's Road (SR 308). The trees were destroyed by hurricane in the 1990s. Oakland Plantation was located on the Roanoke River and was one of the largest plantations in Bertie County. The farm was established by William's father, Moses Bishop, a Revolutionary War Sargeant. William was a veteran of the War of 1812. The plantation house was one of the finest built in Roxobel since Woodbourne, the still surviving adjacent plantation home of Stephen Andrews Norfleet. Later known as the "Powell Place," the original Oakland plantation house still exists with the Bishop-Hardy-Powell family cemetery on its grounds.

William Bishop also owned a plantation on the Roanoke River in adjacent Northampton County. This plantation was known as the Bishop-Powell Plantation well into the 1930's. At his death in 1863, William Bishop owned approximately 2,000 acres of land and some 90 slaves.

Following emancipation of slaves in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, the 1870 census shows Samuel Bishop and his sons residing nearby William Bishop's widow, Mary Louise Horne Bishop, in Roxobel. According to family stories, Byrd Bishop went north and had a family in upstate New York; he was not heard of again. Andrew Bishop became a river boat gambler and was eventually killed on the boat. Exum Capeheart is shown in successive US Decennial Censuses residing with his family in Jackson Township, Northampton County; and in Scotland Neck and Conoconan Townships, in Halifax County. He died in 1924.

By 1870, Samuel Bishop's family had taken the surname Bishop, the name of their former slave owner. Sometime during the early 1870's, Samuel died. About 1875, his son David married Hannah Elizabeth Ann Cherry (1855-1946), who had also been a young slave at Oakland Plantation.

According to Hannah's death certificate, her parents were Wright Cherry (1839 – 1924) and Ellen Walton (1840 – 1917), of Bertie County. By 1870, Ellen Walton had also adopted the Bishop family name and resided with Samuel Bishop, his sons and her four children, Hannah, Maggie, Gusto (Augustus) and Matilda.

As slaves, Hannah Cherry's parents, Wright Cherry and Ellen Walton, originated on the Cherry and Outlaw family plantations near Windsor, NC, the Bertie County seat. Both Wright and Ellen's families were owned by Ralph and Celia Cherry Outlaw. The descendants of Capt. Solomon Cherry, an American Revolutionary War officer, and associated and intermarried families, the Outlaws, Waltons and Easons, were among the prominent planters of northeastern North Carolina. They were planters, attorneys, NC state and federal legislators, clerks of court, county sheriffs, and merchants. They also accounted for several officers and soldiers in the Army of the Confederate States of America (CSA).

According to Wright Cherry's daughter, Maria (Mariah) Cherry Newsome, Wright's mother was named Judy (Judah/Judia) Outlaw. She was born about 1810. Judy was a house slave on the plantation of Ralph Outlaw located in Mitchells, Bertie County, immediately across from the still existent Holly Grove Baptist Church. The landmark church was originally organized as the Outlaw Chapel in 1804 and continued through a gift of land from Ralph Outlaw in 1825. When Ralph Outlaw died in 1836, his widow, Celia Cherry Outlaw, a daughter of Capt. Solomon Cherry, inherited Judy Outlaw and her three children. In her subsequent bequests, transfers, loans, and gifts of slaves to her extended family members, Celia typically grouped slave family members together in proximity to the slave father. Celia's disposition of her slaves throughout her life time is well documented in deeds and estate papers filed in the Bertie County Courthouse.

In 1838, Celia gave Judy's son, Madison, age six, to nephew David William Cherry, a son of Solomon Cherry, Sr. of Windsor, NC, probably as a child slave companion. In 1842, in anticipation of her 1844 marriage to William Walton, a Hertford County planter, and move to his cotton plantation in Greene County, Alabama; Celia gave Judy Outlaw and her children, Mariah, Ester, Wright and Harriet, to Celia's brother, Solomon Cherry, Sr. and his wife, Jane Outlaw Cherry. Thus, Judy's children acquired the Cherry family surname. Solomon also received Ralph Outlaw's plantation from Celia and over ten other slaves through the Outlaw slave division.

Descendants of Wright Cherry and his post-Civil War wife, Malinda Gilliam, including Wright's daughter, Maria (Mariah) Cherry Newsome, maintain that Solomon Cherry, Sr. was Wright Cherry's father. Solomon Cherry, Sr. was a successful commissioned merchant in Norfolk, Virginia. Subsequently, he

held a federal appointment in Washington, DC. He was said to be a friend of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay and acquainted with most members of the U.S. Congress. He was Corresponding Secretary for organized relief efforts to stem the effects of the Yellow Fever epidemic that devastated Norfolk in 1855. He was an organizer of the Norfolk Corn Exchange. During the Civil War, he was authorized by the CSA to operate on the high seas as a privateer. Wright and his siblings, Madison and Harriet, were able to buy over 350 acres of land from white Cherry family members in 1869, 1870, and 1879. In his later years, Solomon Cherry, Sr. lived close to Wright Cherry near Holly Grove Baptist Church.

Celia gave other slaves to members of her extended family, as well. Celia gave slaves named Wright (who we will designate as Sr. to distinguish him from Wright Cherry born 1839) and Elec to her daughter and son-in-law, Mary Outlaw and Alfred Eason. Elec (who is shown with last name Eason in the 1870 Census) was Judy's brother; Wright, Sr., was probably her sibling, as well. When Alfred Eason was brutally shot to death by an unknown assailant in 1859, the brothers passed to the ownership of Alfred's wife, Mary. Much earlier, the 1804 estate settlement of David and Martha Outlaw, Ralph Outlaw's parents, gave Elec to be a child companion of David Outlaw, later an attorney, NC State and US Representative, and NC Militia Colonel.

Celia also inherited a slave family consisting of Bryant and Hannah (who we will designate as Hannah, Sr. to distinguish her from Hannah Ann Cherry) and their children. Given family naming conventions, it is probable that a slave woman named Hannah mentioned in the 1795 slave division of David Outlaw, Ralph Outlaw's father, was the mother of Hannah, Sr.

Celia took Bryant and Hannah, Sr., their three children, and other slaves with her to Greene County, Alabama in 1844. Celia's husband, William Walton, died in Alabama in 1849. In William Walton's estate settlement and slave division, Celia got back the slaves she brought to their marriage. She returned to Bertie County with her personal possessions and sixteen slaves. From the estate settlement documents, the names of Bryant and Hannah, Sr.'s children are Johnston, Jane, Ben, and Billy. Immediately preceding is listed a slave girl named Ellen. Bryant also appears on the slave inventory with a son, "Little" or "Boy Bryant." Apparently, Bryant, Sr. had taken the last married name of their slave holder, Celia Cherry Outlaw Walton.

By the 1850 Census, Celia and her slaves resided with Celia's brother, Joseph Blount Cherry, a NC state legislator and businessman, at The Oaks, the Cherry family ancestral farm, in Snakebite, near Windsor, NC. The Oaks was very close to historic Hope Plantation, the restored home of NC Governor David Stone (1808-1810).

Perhaps Wright Cherry and Ellen Walton met and conceived Hannah Cherry in 1855 when Wright was on the Solomon Cherry, Sr. plantation and Ellen was on the plantation of Solomon's brother, Joseph Blount Cherry. The Cherry family farms were not that far apart. It appears from 1870 census data that close after Hannah's birth, Wright and Ellen conceived two other children, Gusto (Augustus) and Matilda, who Ellen reported in the 1900 Census did not live to adulthood.

Although Celia often stated the intent of her slave transactions was to benefit her family members in perpetuity out of love and affection for them, the effect of Celia's actions was to keep the Walton and Cherry slave families together or in close proximity. In 1861, Celia Cherry Outlaw Walton wrote her last will and testament. She expressed her desire that her slaves should not be sold upon her death. In this will, Celia loans Ellen Walton to her niece and nephew-in-law, John and Celia Jane Askew Andrews of Roxobel. Since Celia does not mention Bryant Walton or Hannah, Sr. in her will, we assume they were deceased by 1861. Also, Celia gives Wright Cherry's brother, Madison Cherry, and Eliza, his slavery style wife, to Joseph Outlaw Cherry, a son of Celia's brother William Blount Cherry.

By some unknown transaction between 1861 and 1863, the children of Hannah, Sr. and Bryant Walton, namely, Johnston, Jane, Ben, and Billy, end up on the Bishop Plantation in Roxobel. They are listed in the slave division of William Wiley Bishop in 1865. This is the same slave division in which the names Sam and Hannah appear, inherited by William's widow, Mary Horne Bishop, and in whose close proximity, Samuel Bishop and his sons and Ellen Walton Bishop and her children are living by 1870.

A Bishop family story is told of Ellen that she and Wright were separated in slavery times when Ellen slapped her master's son for a sexual advance. The story continues that Ellen was sold away further South as a rebellious slave, but walked for three summers at the end of the Civil War to be reunited with her daughter, Hannah. While the story lacks particulars, this incident most likely would have happened between 1861, when Ellen Walton is sent to Roxobel, and 1865, the year in which the Bishop family traditionally held that Ellen gave birth to Mary Magdalene (Mag) Hardy. As reported by David and Hannah's youngest child, Ruby, "Mag" was the daughter of Ellen and Edward Hardy of Roxobel.

David and Hannah's oldest child, Carrie Lee Bishop, was born about 1876; a son, James William Bishop, was born in 1878. Sometime after, the family moved five miles away to Rich Square, a larger township in adjacent Northampton County. In Rich Square, David and Hannah had six more children, Ellen Devolia Bishop, born 1886; John Sam Bishop, born October 1889; Paul Andrew (P.A.) Bishop, born January 1889; Barnabas Bryant Bishop, born 1891; Mary Pearl Dewart Bishop, born 1894; and Ruby Wilbur

Bishop, born September 1896. The 1900 U.S. Census also indicated Hannah bore eleven children of whom eight were living.

In 1889, David and Hannah purchased two acres of land on the road from Rich Square to Roxobel. This property was close by the town hotel where family tradition says Hannah and her mother, Ellen, worked as laundresses. The former Shoulars Hotel building and David and Hannah's original residence still exist in Rich Square. The 1900 U.S. Census shows Hannah's mother, Ellen Walton Bishop, and half-sister, Mary Magdalene (Mag) Hardy lived close by.

Very close by also lived George W. Bishop, the son of David and Hannah's former plantation owner. George W. moved to Rich Square with his family around 1875. He had served as an officer in the CSA Army. He became a Justice of the Peace in Jackson, a chair of the Northampton County School Committee, a member of the post-Civil War NC provisional state government, and an elected North Carolina State Senator. Although about the same age and probably childhood associates on the Bishop Plantation, David and George W. worked together, but held divergent political views. David was a reconstruction era Republican, while George W. was a Democrat and unabashed white supremacist.

On May 11, 1901, with brothers Grandisson and Giles Maggett, David Bishop purchased 1,950 square feet of land in Rich Square town center. The location was the former Lodge Hall of the Rich Square Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria, an African American lodge of a national benevolent society. At this location, David Bishop operated a barbershop, a shoe shine parlor, and a bar.

David Bishop was accredited with many innovations in Rich Square, on his own and with others, including establishment of the colored First Baptist Church of Rich Square; the Rich Square Institute (later, the W. S. Creecy School); first informal Mayor of Rich Square before its incorporation as a township; founding member of the Northampton County Moral, Material and Educational Association; chair of the Rich Square Republican Party; keeper of the polls; and member of the Northampton County School Committee.

David Bishop died on April 20, 1906 at age 54. According to family tradition, he is buried at Sandy Branch Baptist Church in Roxobel. Church records show he had been actively involved in the church building committee. His Roanoke-Chowan Times obituary read "*The death of David Bishop last Friday night after a long illness removes a prominent colored citizen from our town. He had been the town barber for many years and will be missed. He lived well and had accumulated some property.*"

On December 20, 1907, Hannah purchased five acres of land on Roberts Road in Rich Square that became the Bishop home place. Hannah's mother, Ellen, died on January 25, 1916. Hannah died on September 4, 1946. "Mag" lived until March 12, 1952. All are buried at Sandy Branch Baptist Church in Roxobel.

Wright Cherry married Malinda Gilliam in 1869. They had thirteen children and resided in the Windsor area of Bertie County. Wright kept in touch with his relatives in Rich Square and Hannah visited with her half siblings in Ahoskie. Wright enlisted in the 14th Regiment, Heavy Artillery, US Colored Troops, during the Civil War; he attained the rank of Master Sergeant. He was accredited with building the Cherry School, being a founding member of the Piney Woods Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, served as a County Commissioner and Magistrate, and was nominated to serve the county in the NC legislature. Wright died on July 25, 1925 and is buried with his wife, Malinda, on the Cherry family homestead across from Holly Grove Baptist Church.

Of David and Hannah's children, Carrie Lee Bishop moved to Baltimore, Maryland and married John Gibbs, a supplier of wood, coal and ice. James William Bishop, a barber, married Mignonette Roberts, a school teacher and federal government clerk, and moved first to Rocky Mount, NC and then to Washington, DC. John Sam Bishop, a teacher and school principal, married Lillian Morris and settled in Norfolk, Virginia. Barnabas Bryant Bishop, a tailor and church sexton, married Annie Green, a catering employee, and settled in Baltimore. Mary Pearl Dewart Bishop, a school teacher, married John Robinson, a laborer. They settled in Baltimore, as well.

Ellen Devolia Bishop, a teacher, musician, composer, and school principal, married first Elijah Lassiter and second Joseph Leonard Gordon. Ellen and Joseph Gordon resided in Rich Square, where their son, Joseph Henry (Joe) Gordon, Sr., operated a funeral business and was the first elected African American Rich Square Town Councilor since reconstruction.

Rev. Dr. P. A. Bishop married first Nettie Askew and second Viola Taylor. For a time, Rev. Bishop lived with Nettie Askew in Roxobel where he was a "preacher of the gospel" at Sandy Branch Church and principal of the Roxobel Rosenwald School. After Nettie's death, he married Viola Taylor, a teacher and librarian. They lived in Rich Square on Roberts Road where he pastored five area churches and operated several business enterprises. Ruby Wilbur Bishop, a lifelong school teacher, briefly married James Matthew Scott. For most of her life, she resided in Rich Square, maintaining the house that her mother, Hannah, built on Roberts Road.

There are many African-American families intermarried and associated with the Bishop family of Rich Square; among them are the surnames

© February 2016 Elbert R. Bishop
Revised November 15, 2016

Maggett/Majette, Cherry, Walton, Roberts, Ashe, Creecy, Tann, Lassiter, Scott, Gordon, Flood and Walden.

Our early narrative reflects the lives of many Africans unjustly brought to America's shores. The Bishop legacy emphasized faith, education, ingenuity, hard work, community institution building, and commitment to instilling achiever values in each generation. Although focused on sheer survival, the early Bishops were laying a foundation for advancement in successive generations, a history that is still being written.