

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Loving Adoption

Adoption into the family of God is a supernatural act of the Savior's love toward the believer. Adoption of a child into an earthly family, although not supernatural, nonetheless is a demonstration of extraordinary love.

Not until the 1850s did the US legal system formally recognize adoption. By 1873, twenty-two states, including NC, had adoption laws on the books. But adoption had been occurring informally across the country, including Bucklesberry, since the Colonial period. One example of loving adoption may have been shown by Bucklesberry matriarch, Annie Hill Sutton (1807-1881).

An incredibly strong woman of great character, Annie outlived her husband, Hardy Sutton (1803-1861), by two decades. Hardy's premature death at the onset of the Civil War era left Annie with seven of their fourteen children to rear on her own.

Annie's love and dedication to family extended beyond her immediate household. By 1866, she had amassed 23 grandchildren from five children who were living outside the home. Her joy and fulfillment as a grandmother must have been glowingly evident. One grandchild, Samuel L. Sutton (1854-1941), however, was estranged from the family.

Nicknamed, Pete, Samuel was purportedly the only known descendant of Thomas Sutton (1826-1894), one of Hardy's and Annie's sons. Although Thomas was married to Julia Ann Moore until his death, their union produced no children. Through a pre- or extra-marital relationship with another woman, Thomas sired Samuel in 1854. Documented in the 1880 Census, Samuel was a mulatto (multiracial). There is no evidence that Thomas ever owned up to his paternity as Samuel's father.

In 1866, Annie was granted custody of her grandson, Samuel, through an apprenticeship indenture. Included in the Clellan Sutton Collection of Bucklesberry papers is a legal document issued by the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freeman and Abandoned Lands, State of North Carolina. Signed by Annie (or Anne, with an X-mark) and witnessed by her nephew, Jeremiah Sutton, the document reads:

"This Indenture, Made the 30th day of March 1866, between S. P. Fowler, Jr., Assist. Supt. Freed. of the one part, and Anne Sutton of the other part: Witnesseth, That the said, S. P. Fowler, Jr. doth put, place and bind unto the said Anne Sutton one orphan, named Samuel Sutton aged 11 years to live after the manner of an apprentice and servant until the said apprentice shall attain

the age of twenty-one years; during all which time the said apprentice his mistress faithfully shall serve, and her lawful commands everywhere obey.”

“And the said Anne Sutton doth covenant, and promise, and agree, that she will teach and instruct the said apprentice, or cause him to be taught and instructed, to read and write; and that she will constantly find and provide for said apprentice, during the term aforesaid, sufficient diet, washing, lodging and apparel, fitting for an apprentice; and also other things necessary, both in sickness and health. In witness whereof, the parties to these presents have set their hands and seals, the day and year above written.”

An apprenticeship trade for Samuel, such as farming, is not mentioned in the indenture. This omission may have been intentional. Martha Mewborn Marble, local genealogist and historian, believes the document reads more like an adoption, even though NC did not pass its first adoption law until seven years later.

With the emancipation of slaves, farmers were in desperate need of help with planting and harvesting after the Civil War. Therefore, some apprenticeship indentures were nothing more than contracts for child labor.

Annie’s true motive in obtaining the indenture for Samuel may never be known. It is likely that the indenture was the compassionate act of a loving grandmother who wanted nothing more than to include her grandson in the family, care for him, and formally acknowledge his birth right.

According to local descendants, Annie conveyed land to Samuel before her death, and he was listed as a farmer in the 1880 Census. Upon his death, Samuel was appropriately buried in the Hardy and Annie Hill Sutton Cemetery in Bucklesberry.