

The Official and Unofficial Histories of the Cotten Family

By

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On June 16, 1876 a public meeting took place in Winton, North Carolina. In response to a presidential proclamation of the National Centennial, citizens had gathered in the county seat to select a "suitable person to write an historical sketch on the history of Hertford County and deliver an address on the 4th of July 1876". The committee holding the meeting chose native son Major John Wheeler Moore unanimously. His address delivered in Winton the following month was a great success. Encouraged by his friend Murfreesboro attorney W.N.H. Smith, Moore undertook to write a serialized history of his native county. On January 4, 1877 the Murfreesboro Enquirer announced "with this issue we commence the publication of the history of Hertford County written by one of Hertford's most gifted sons". The series would run through all of that year and the next.

In Chapter IV, Moore began the official history of his family with the story of his great-great grandfather: "The Cottons and their descendants have been for nearly two centuries inhabitants of the St. John's section. John Cotton's kinsman and contemporary, Capt. Arthur Cotton, was for long years vestryman at the old Episcopal chapel. He came from England early in the century and until about 1750, made voyages as commander of a ship, that plied between the colony and the mother country. In his old age, he built the first brick house ever erected in Hertford county, and died in affluence. Though a vestryman of the church, this ancient mariner was celebrated for his quick temper, and probably visited the army in Flanders sometime in his life. He was no great admirer of kings and had bitter cause for resentment. His father's kinswoman, the gentle and lovely Lady Alice Lisle had suffered death at the hands of the inhuman Judge Jeffreys in the Bloody Assize. The noblest ladies of his court vainly implored King James to spare her life. Captain Cotton lived at Mulberry Grove, where three generations of Beverlys had preceded him in its occupancy." This is all most interesting. It is true that Arthur Cotten was a vestryman at St. John's Chapel and that he built Mulberry Grove, the first brick house in the county in 1758. The rest of this tale is utter fiction. As early as 1905 Samuel A. Ashe's "Biographical History of North Carolina" included an important note attached to the sketch of Dr. Godwin Cotten Moore explaining what had happened. In the 1870s a man named Ballis appeared at Mulberry Grove. He claimed he was looking for heirs to an English estate that had descended into the Cotton family from Lady Alice Lisle. Dr. Thomas C. Parramore and others have speculated that he was a confidence man hoping to swindle the family. Penniless in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Moores seized onto this fiction with an alacrity born of desperation. In 1876 John Wheeler Moore's brother Will actually named his second child Alice Lisle Moore. It was at this time that the name, which had always been spelled "Cotten" suddenly began appearing as "Cotton" in printed media. It goes without saying that no English inheritance was forthcoming.

In truth Arthur Cotten had been born in this country in 1716. His father John Cotten, the "kinsman" alluded to above, lived in Virginia at South Quay on the Blackwater River near the present town of Franklin and just four miles from the North Carolina line. In 1719 he and his wife Martha and their growing family moved south and settled on Potecasi Creek. The area at that time was part of Bertie County. Today it is in Hertford County. John Cotten died in 1728. His will preserved at the courthouse in Windsor listed fourteen children, all of whom would live to adulthood. They were John, Patience, Martha, William, Anne, Mary, Samuel, Joseph, Alexander Spotswood, Susanna, Arthur, James, Thomas

and Priscilla. From the early eighteenth century, the Cottens had figured prominently in the history of the Roanoke-Chowan counties before moving into Halifax and Edgecombe. They also tended to be hot blooded, hardheaded and contentious. Unfazed by societal norms, a number of Cotton men constructed domestic arrangements that must have left their neighbors slack-jawed with amazement. This was the unofficial history of the Cotten family that has been conveniently forgotten.

The trouble started early on with Arthur's older brother Samuel Cotten. He came to North Carolina several years before his father and settled in Bertie County at what became known as Cottens Cross Roads. Today this is the village of Roxobel, ten miles south of Mulberry Grove. On February 12, 1733 Arthur "orphan of John Cotten deceased" appeared in Bertie County court and requested that his brother Samuel be named as his guardian. Samuel and his wife Elizabeth had Samuel, Jr., John and Euridice, who married John Gardiner. Elizabeth died sometime in the early 1750s. By 1756 Samuel had taken up with Lydia Ewell. It just happened that Lydia was very much married to Solomon Ewell and had two children of her own. The outraged husband went to court where he declared that his wife had abandoned him to live with Samuel Cotten. Samuel and Lydia had had several children together by this point. Their descendant Major Bruce Cotten stated that the Ewells were divorced. However, documented proof of the dissolution of the Ewell marriage has not survived. Samuel, Jr. had married Lydia's daughter Elizabeth. The younger man's chagrin over his father's very public affair with his mother-in-law can only be imagined. Samuel had moved to Northampton County when he made his will on January 16, 1774. It was proven in May Court later that year. Son Samuel received a male slave and a chest of drawers. Daughter Euridice inherited a female slave. His son John was left a male slave "if the the said John Cotton should come himself for the said Negro but Not Else." The bulk of the estate was left to Lydia for her lifetime and to their three children: Elizabeth Cotten Ewell, Sally Cotten Ewell and Roderick Cotten Ewell. Lydia Cotten made her will in Northampton County on January 8, 1783. It was proven in May Court the same year. By this point, all mention of "Ewell" had vanished. Whatever the circumstances of his birth, her son Roderick now styled himself as Cotten. He inherited most of his mother's estate. Roderick Cotten married Ann Carney, daughter of General Richard Carney of Halifax County and settled in Chatham County, where he had purchased a large estate from his cousin James Cotten in 1794. Lydia's daughter Sally Cotten Ewell had died in Northampton County in 1779 leaving a nuncupative will. Her daughter Elizabeth Cotten Ewell had married Frederick Ruffin (alias Green) and then Watson Rutland, a relative of Arthur Cotten's wife. Lydia also remembered her daughter Elizabeth from her marriage to Solomon Ewell as she left two ewes and lambs to Elizabeth Cotten, wife of Samuel. How odd that she should have two daughters named "Elizabeth"! Meanwhile, Samuel and Elizabeth had moved on to Edgecombe County, where they established a prominent family. It was left to Major Bruce Cotten to sum up the life of his cantankerous ancestor in his book "As We Were": Little is known of Samuel Cotten, except that he was hardy, vigorous, domineering and rich. He was not at all conventional in his relations with women and some other things, I suspect, and having lived to a great age more feared than loved, he finally decided that it was time ...to write his will disinheriting his eldest son and bestowed very little on his other legitimates..." History does not record what became of his son John or daughter Euridice.

John Cotten of Northampton County was the oldest son of the progenitor's son John and therefore the third generation of that name. Born around 1718, he was technically Arthur Cotten's nephew. However, there were only two or three years difference in the men's ages making them contemporaries. Descendants of John Cotten III claimed that he married Mary Whitmel of "Ahosky". They were the

parents of four children: Joab Cotten of Halifax County, Sally Cotten who married James House, Josiah Cotten and Mary Cotten who married Hardyman Abington of Bertie County. After Elizabeth's death, John formed a liaison with his second cousin Mary Wills Tart. Mary was the granddaughter of the first John Cotten's fourth child William Cotten who had married Sarah Dew. Their daughter Priscilla Cotten had married Richard Wills around 1750. As in the case of Samuel Cotten and Lydia Ewell, Mary Wills was quite married to James Tart. Divorce was unheard of at the time making it impossible for her to marry John Cotten. This did not stop them from living together and having three sons: Henry Cotten Tart, William Cotten Tart and James Cotten Tart. When James Tart finally obliged everyone by dying, John and Mary married and had five more children. First were twins Allen and Willie named for the Halifax County politicians Allen and Willie Jones. Then came Jonathan, John and Mary. John Cotten's will was made on September 6, 1782 and proven in Northampton County's September Court of 1790. In this remarkable document, Cotten goes to great pains to identify each piece of property including enumerating from whom he purchased it, including one tract acquired from Arthur Cotten, and makes contingency arrangements naming secondary heirs in case the primary legatees should predecease him. He lists "my eight small children" by name and then declares emphatically William Cotten Tart, James Cotten Tart and Henry Cotten Tart to be my Lawful sons and they Shall inherit as Lawful Heirs of my body with the rest of their Brothers, that is to say Allen, Willie, Jonathan and John BEING sons by my second wife." Cotten was taking no chances on the inheritances he had earmarked for William, James and Henry. One of the executors was his son Joab. Witnesses included kinsmen Shadrack and Thomas Rutland. Henry Cotten Tart, the oldest of the Tart Cottens, was born around 1768. He overcame any stigma attached to his birth representing Northampton County in the legislature 1795 – 1802. In 1806 he married Sophia Mumford. By 1824 he was living in Tarboro. His brother William Cotten Tart died single in Northampton County in 1794. There is no record of James Cotten Tart after 1795. Like the son of Samuel Cotten, they shed the Tart name and styled themselves as Cottens once they had entered adulthood. Of their younger siblings, the twins Allen and Willie died single in 1795 and 1805. Jonathan passed on in 1790. The youngest boy John IV was luckier. He moved to Edgecombe County, which he represented in the legislature in 1807. He first married Mary Tucker in 1809, but she died the following year. He married for the second time in 1811 to Elizabeth Andrews, daughter of Cullin Andrews and Mary Battle. He left the state after 1824 and died intestate in Tennessee on November 1, 1825. His wife and six children moved on to Mississippi settling in Hinds County. There is no record of John and Mary Cotten's youngest child Mary after 1795.

Thomas Cotten, who was born around 1720, was the thirteenth child of John Cotten and Martha Godwin. Only one brother James separated him from Arthur. He lived in Hertford County about ten miles northeast of Mulberry Grove on the road to Winton, somewhere between the present localities of Union and California. About the time he was twenty, Thomas fathered an illegitimate son with Ann Moore of Bertie County. Her father Epaphroditus Moore owned both land and slaves. He appears to have been of the same social class as the Cottens, so it is a mystery as to why Ann and Thomas did not marry. Thomas acknowledged his son Thomas Moore on November 16, 1758 with a deed of gift of twenty-five pounds payable when he would come of age. On the same day, Anne Moore executed a deed of gift to her son for a "Negro boy Bob that my father Ephaphroditus Moore willed, when my son comes of age". Young Thomas grew up and established himself in the community and married Priscilla Knight. At the time of his Revolutionary War service, he dropped "Moore" and became "Thomas Cotten". In 1786, Captain Thomas Cotten with his wife and large family moved to Sumner County, Tennessee to take charge of land, which he had been granted as payment for his military service. Here

he established the community of Cottontown, which endures to this day. Interestingly, he named one of his sons Arthur no doubt in honor of his uncle at Mulberry Grove. This is the only time this happened in the Cotten family. Thomas Cotten, Jr. died on June 5, 1795. His widow Priscilla lived to be almost ninety-five dying on November 1, 1843.

Meanwhile, Thomas Cotten, Sr. had married Patience Bridger. She was a sister of Sarah Bridger, who had married Thomas' brother James Cotten. After Patience's death around 1767, he married her younger half-sister Mary Cotten. Thomas was the father of thirteen children: James Cotten, who married Elizabeth Dickinson and died in Northampton County in 1797; Lytha Cotten who married Robert Hobday and moved to Sumner County, Tennessee; Charity Cotten; Mary Cotten, who married Absolom Spiers and remained in Hertford County; Lemuel Cotten who married Abigail Dickerson and moved to Jefferson County, Mississippi; Lowena Cotten, who married Mr. Read; Martha Cotten, Elizabeth Cotten, Lydia Cotten, Joseph Cotten, Tempy Cotten, who married Mr. Copeland, Sally Cotten and Noah Cotten. It is uncertain how many of the children were the offspring of Patience and how many belonged to Mary. Thomas Cotten, Sr. wrote his will on April 18, 1787. It was proven in August Term of the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions for Hertford County the same year. Thomas enumerates all of the children listed above as well as a Samuel Cotten Overton, who appears to be another illegitimate child.

Despite Thomas Cotten, Sr.'s legacy of progeny both legitimate and illegitimate, it was his son Noah who would be the next cause for concern for the extended family. He is believed to have been the thirteenth and youngest child of Thomas, Sr. After Lemuel had departed for Mississippi, Noah remained on the family property in Hertford County. He was listed in the 1800 census as a male between the ages of 26 and 45 with two sons. By this point, Noah Cotten was living with Christian Wiggins. Christian's racial makeup was Caucasian. However, family tradition reports that her mother was a Chowanoc Indian. For this reason, she was labeled a free woman of color. They had eight children: Wiley Wiggins, Ricks Wiggins, Micajah Wiggins, John Henry Wiggins, William Wiggins, Dicy Wiggins, David Wiggins and Lucinda Wiggins. Census records list all of these individuals as people of color. Noah Cotten wrote his will on October 24, 1812. He stated that he was leaving the land he had inherited from his father Thomas Cotten to the "sons of Christian Wiggins". Later he refers to Sally, Dicy and William. A codicil was added on March 12, 1815 in which he names two other children born since the writing of the will. They were David and Lucinda. Cotten named "my good friend John Vann" as executor. Vann was a neighbor and an attorney. His papers in the North Carolina Archives contain copies of the wills of both Thomas Cotten, Sr. and Noah Cotten. The official records were lost in an arson fire that destroyed the Hertford County Courthouse in 1830. Noah Cotten died sometime in 1815. References in the Vann Papers to the estate of "Christian Cotten" in 1816 show that she died shortly after her companion. Godwin Cotten of Mulberry Grove, Arthur's son became the guardian for Noah's children. After Godwin's died in 1830, his grandson Dr. Godwin Cotten Moore assumed this role. On December 24, 1825 James Copeland, Hertford County's representative in the state Senate introduced a bill "to legitimate and alter the names of Wiley Wiggins, Ricks Wiggins, Micajah Wiggins and John Wiggins of Hertford County, NC, illegitimate children of Noah Cotton and Christian Wiggins". The bill failed to pass. Unfazed by the General Assembly's lack of action, the four men were soon calling themselves "Cotton". Following Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, both free blacks and slaves were placed under draconian restrictions by Southern legislatures. Wiley Cotton remained in Hertford County dying before 1860. However, Ricks Cotton, Micajah Cotton and John Henry Cotton moved to Indiana by 1836. The fate of Noah and Christian's five youngest children is unknown.

These stories were just part of the complicated legacy confronting the Cotten descendants across the Southeast United States when John Wheeler Moore started to write in 1876. The free-wheeling ways of the Age of Enlightenment had given way to the Victorian era, which emphasized conformity to social mores and an obsession with respectability. Peccadilloes that would have been winked at in the previous century were now taboo. Keenly aware of his generation's outlook and inspired by the National Centennial, Moore resolved to create a new narrative. With one stroke of his pencil, he eliminated the thirteen siblings of his ancestor Arthur Cotten. With them went all of the scandal, gossip and innuendo that had attached itself to the Cotten name for the past 150 years. Like Athena bursting full-grown from the head of Zeus, Arthur Cotten arrived from England as an adult. A true patriot and churchman, he would establish the family at Mulberry Grove. He was succeeded by his son Godwin Cotten portrayed as a devout Baptist and friend of the preacher Lemuel Burkitt. The story reached full flower in the life of Dr. Godwin Cotten Moore, moderator of the Chowan Baptist Association for thirty-seven years, founder of the Chowan Baptist Female Institute, beloved physician and patriarch of a respected family. Circumstances worked to aid Moore in his endeavor. All of the offending parties were long-dead. Their children and grandchildren had left the area. Older relatives who knew better, including Dr. Godwin Cotten Moore and Dr. Cornelius Moore, remained conspicuously silent. Moore's strategy worked. Within a generation, the narrative of the seafaring Arthur Cotten as founder of the family's fortunes had found acceptance among all of his descendants. John Wheeler Moore named his oldest son for his ancestor, and there would be three more Arthur Cotton Moores. Samuel Cotten's descendant Bruce Cotten began serious research into the history of the Cotton family in the 1920s. When he arrived with a copy of the first John Cotten's will proving the relationship to countless individuals around the country, the Moores were curiously unimpressed. They had their narrative in Grandpa's book. What more did they need? To this day, they remain uninterested in looking beyond Arthur Cotten for historical facts and connections.

The sons and grandsons of the first John Cotten and the women they shared their lives with were remarkable people. The Cotten men lived life on their own terms undeterred by convention. Lydia Ewell and Mary Wills Tart were educated women who understood the laws of inheritance and were determined that their children would receive their equal share of the family lands. These men loved their children freely acknowledging all of them as their own and ensuring that they were provided for materially. Looking back on this time through the lens of the Victorians, one would expect these people to have been ostracized for their unconventional lifestyles. Just the opposite happened. A host of legal documents shows that an extensive network of Cotten and Rutland relatives interacted with them regularly witnessing land transactions and settling estates. No hint of scandal kept Roderick Cotten from making an excellent marriage and establishing a prominent family in the Piedmont. Questionable antecedents did not prevent two of John Cotten III's sons from being elected to the legislature. How did they do it? The Cottens were part of the landed gentry. For them middle class morality was something for the little people; they were above all that. They had the wealth and the force of will to carry it off in the face of society's disapproval. Meanwhile, their children proudly claimed the Cotten name. Masters of re-invention and always ready to grasp an opportunity, they stayed ahead of their times and not behind. They made their own histories. There are lessons to be learned from these outliers. It is time to consider the complete history of the Cotten family.

