

THE FOUR ROOKS SISTERS

BY CORNELIA REID JONES



1951 FAMILY REUNION AT THE HOME OF MR. AND MRS. HOLLIS BURKE.

In Gates County, North Carolina, there lived a white woman named Sally Rooks who bore four daughters by her father's slave. By written and verbal record he was described as a black man of exceeding height and large stature whose name was Jacob Brady. Their first daughter, Polly Rooks, was born in 1799 and died in 1881. After Polly, came the three other sisters, Judith, Sally and Peggy Rooks. Their probable birth dates were 1801, 1803, and 1805.

Polly Rooks, oldest of the four sisters, married David Rooks (1795-1850), a carpenter and cooper. They had six children whose names were Joseph, Mary, Joanna, Nancy, John and James. Two of these children, James (1829-1906), a blacksmith, and John (1836-1910), a carpenter, married the two Burke sisters, Elizabeth (1837-1900) and Cassandra (1840-1907).

Nancy Rooks, daughter of David and Polly, married William Burke (1820-1886) and with her infant child, died in childbirth. Then this same William Burke, incidentally the uncle of Elizabeth and Cassandra, married his deceased wife's sister, Joanna Rooks. This union,

with the eleven children born of it, was the beginning of the Burke branch of the family.

Mary Rooks, another daughter of David and Polly married Thomas Butler, blacksmith and partner of Mary's brother, James. Joseph Rooks, also son of David and Polly Rooks, married Harriet Cuff. They had four daughters, two of whom married the half-brothers of the above mentioned Thomas Butler. These three half-brothers, Thomas, David and Patrick Butler, began the Butler branch of the family.

All branches of the Rooks family lived in Gates County, North Carolina, which was carved from three surrounding counties in 1788 in order that the people of that section could attend a new and nearer court house without crossing the swollen Chowan river in rough and "boisterous" wintry weather.

As free men and women, the members of this group were subjected to heavy taxes, unfair codes, customs and laws. It became obligatory, not only to farm industriously with wife and children, but also to work at some trade.

In this group, were spinners, weavers and dyers, seamstresses,

carpenters and coopers, blacksmiths and wheelrights, brickmasons and plasterers, distillers of whiskey and brandy, saloon keepers, Innkeepers, loggers, seine fishers, shoemakers and cabinetmakers.

Judith Rooks, the second of the four sisters, married Micajah Reid (?-1838), a blacksmith and member of the Militia or Grand Muster in which he played in the fife and Drum Corp. Micajah Reid originally came from the southern most part of Nansemond County, Virginia, which was adjoining to the county of Gates in North Carolina.

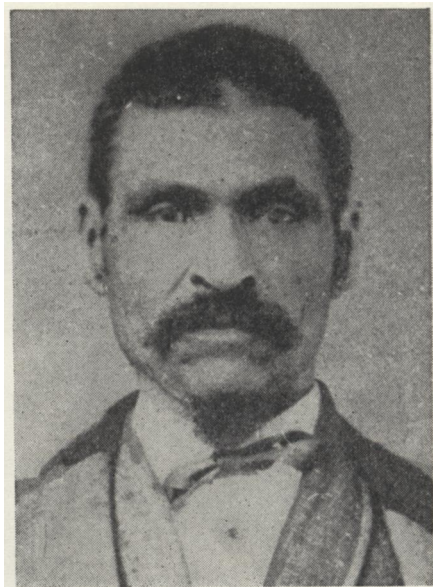
In 1812 a law was passed to exclude from the Militia all Negroes except those used as musicians. In Gates County, the sentiment gradually prevailed whereby even musicians of Negro heritage were no longer desired. By word of mouth comes the description of Micajah's feelings and attitude on being asked to refrain from participating in all the excitement of Muster Day—that day when poor whites from the most isolated dirt-floor log cabins as well as the few pampered slave owners living in rural self-indulgence on the main road converged on that fighting, eye-ball-



JOANNA ROOKS BURKE (MRS. WM. BURKE), GATES COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA.



MARY ROOKS BUTLER, GATES CO.



JAMES (JIM) ROOKS, GATES CO.

gouging, whiskey drinking, heterogeneous throng, to hear the lusty orders of officers being executed by their soldiers in drill.

Micajah was deeply hurt on being asked to give up this phase of his citizenship. He said, "If I have to give up my place in the Muster, there's little need to ask me to fight. Nor shall one son of *mine* fight either."

However his grand and great grand children have served their country during World War I and II and the Korean War.

This same Micajah Reid had lived in or near Sommerton, Virginia in Nansemand County. Sommerton was quite a trading place. The Sommerton road was the main route used at that time to enter North Carolina from Virginia. George Fox, the circuit-riding, Quaker minister, had used this road as he preached in and around these two states. William Byrd also used a part of this route when he surveyed the North Carolina-Virginia dividing line. At any rate, Micajah Reid either walked or rode down Sommerton road when he went to Gates County, North Carolina. There in 1818 he built a home for his wife, Judith Rooks Reid, and their Children.

North Carolina was known for

its mild treatment of Negroes—slave or free. Slaves from South Carolina and Virginia sought refuge in the dangerous and mysterious Dismal Swamp as did the Loyalists. The English, Scotch-Irish, Moravians and other whites overflowed from Virginia to the lonely virgin soil of North Carolina.

William Byrd, in 1730, when surveying the North Carolina-Virginia dividing line, said, on entering the section now called Gates County, "A good many inhabitants the expedition priest married a few people and baptised many children. . . . The early people were for the most part very idle. They had adopted the Indian custom of letting the women do all the work in the fields while the men sat around and smoked. The people lived in log huts and showed no signs of being discontented with their lot. Their only ambition was not to live in Virginia. To live in North Carolina meant less and often no tax."

This may have been true at that time for some people, but by 1799 when Polly Rooks was born, neither she nor the other three Rooks sisters, their husbands nor children could ever afford to live in idleness. The men raised the wool, flax and cotton. The women spun, dyed, wove and sewed the clothes. The

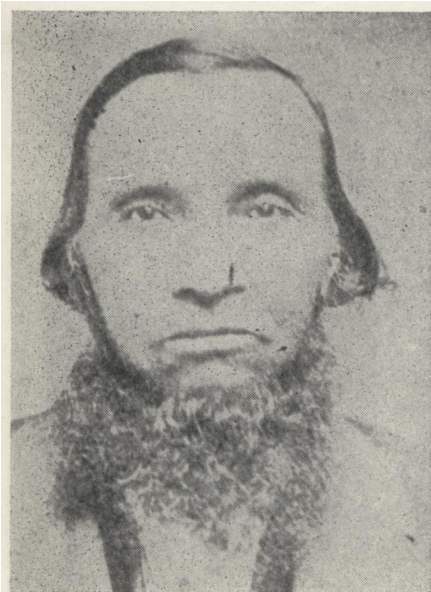
men raised the large crops. The women and children cared for vegetable, herb and flower gardens.

The children not only chopped in the fields and gardens, but they also took their turns at the looms. The boys did basket weaving and rug making, then sold them for pocket money in case the money could be spared. The girls pickled, salted, preserved and learned the duties of keeping house.

The men and boys went sein-fishing in the Chowan river and brought home barrels of fish to be salted for the winter breakfasts. They also raised rice in the marshes of the Chowan River which in some instances bordered the back or sides of their property.

Each family's property had its private burying ground. The remains of Micajah and Judith Rooks lie in the old family cemetery. Their great-granddaughter, Hazel Reid Lock, now lives there with her husband, William I. Lock, their children, her mother and brother.

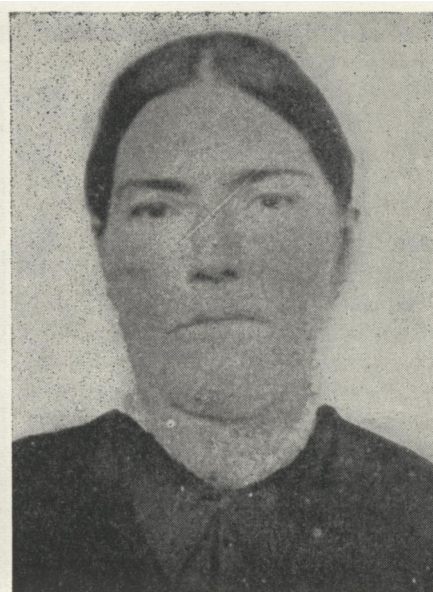
Three of Micajah and Judith's children lived to marry. They were Asbury, William and Mary Reid. Asbury Reid (1827-1901), farmer, Justice of the Peace by popular vote and Republican politician, married Clara Ann Greene, one of a large family in Gates County.



WILLIAM BURKE, GATES CO.



CASSANDRA BURKE ROOKS (MRS. JOHN ROOKS), GATES CO.



ELIZABETH BURKE ROOKS (MRS. JAMES ROOKS), GATES CO.

Some of the other Greenes married Butlers and Burkes thereby causing a very complicated relationship of cousins.

Micajah and Judith Rooks Reid's other son became a minister. He was William Reid, and he married, preached and lived in Murfreesboro, North Carolina with his wife and large family. William Reid's sister, Mary Reid, married William Jones, a painter of Murfreesboro. They also lived in Murfreesboro and reared ten children. Two of their daughters married back into the Burke family.

The third Rooks sister, Sally, married Jet Martin. They had several children, and one of their granddaughters, Sarah Martin, married Alonzo Greene, shoemaker, Post Master, and Innkeeper. Alonzo Greene and his wife, Sarah Martin Greene, had one daughter named Texanna Greene Minter, and she is the only known living descendant of the Martin branch of the family. Mrs. Minter's daughter, Eva, married back into the Butler-Greene branch of the family.

The fourth Rooks sister was Peggy Rooks, and she married Daniel Turner. Their son, Rooks Turner, was an early Howard graduate and served at one time as principal of Elizabeth City State College in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. There are Turners from this branch

still living, but contact has been made with only one, and he is Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner, Professor of English at Roosevelt College, Chicago, Illinois. He has written a book called, "Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect." It was published by the University of Chicago; Chicago, Illinois.

The Butler, Burke, Greene, Jones, Reid and Rooks branches meet each summer in Gates County for a family reunion. Fifty members of this combined group have attended Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia. The two members now attending Hampton are Doris James of the Butler-Greene branch and Duke Harrison of the Reid-Reid branch. The first to attend Hampton was Charles A. Greene who finished in the class of 1875.

Many others attended and graduated from Waters Training School or the old Winton Academy in Winton, North Carolina. The various members attended a wide range of universities—from the University of Washington in Seattle to Sargent in Boston, Massachusetts and from the Atlanta School of Social Work in Atlanta, Georgia to the University of Chicago.

Individuals in the group began to leave Gates County when Hampton Institute spread the news of the wonderful educational opportuni-

ties available there. About this same time work had become scarce for the large number of mechanics now trained in the group. As a result of this scarcity, whole family units moved to other counties, states and sections of the United States. The rise of the white artisan and mechanic pushed these families from their old homes in Gates County and scattered them up and down the Atlantic Sea Coast, towns and cities. There are now small family units in Maine, New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, Utah and California.

Some of the Rooks members are James Carroll Rooks, Camden, New Jersey School Principal; Ruth Rooks Chisholm, Jersey City, New Jersey, Registered Nurse; Rev. Shelby Rooks of St. James Presbyterian Church, New York City; Lucy Rooks Hall, who with her husband Sherman Hall, operates a cleaning and pressing business in Ahoskie, North Carolina and Mr. David Rooks, who at eighty-five still works at his blacksmith shop every day in Gates County.

From the Butler branch comes Ulysses S. Butler and Samuel Hare who are both landowners and successful farmers in Holland, Virginia; the late William Pollard of Portsmouth, Virginia, Superintendent of the Norfolk Division of the Richmond Beneficial Life Insur-

ance Company; Walter Butler, New York City Postal Service and Julius Butler, New York Brokerage Firm Clerk.

From the Burke branch come Dr. Elihu D. Burke, Physician and staff member of the Norfolk Community Hospital, Norfolk, Virginia; Erma Burke Upshur, retired teacher of the Philadelphia school system; Mrs. Madeline Reid Broadus of Trenton, New Jersey, former Philadelphia Department of Welfare Social Worker; Cora Reid McKerrow owner and manager of Reid's Modern Funeral Home in Boston, Massachusetts; Josephus Burke Judkins, Funeral Director of Judkins Colonial Funeral Home, Plainfield, New Jersey; Spurgeon Burke, Manager of Carver and Slowe Halls in Washington, D. C.; and Beulah Burke, Executive Housekeeper of Lucy Slowe Hall, Washington, D. C.

From the Greene branches were the late Charles A. Greene, Head of the Agriculture Department of Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama; The late Cyrus Greene, Sr., Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League, Tampa, Florida; The late Dr. Melvin Greene of New York City; and also Mrs. Esther Greene Holloman Jenkins public school teacher of Greensboro, North Carolina and her son Dr. Leonard Holloman of California.

From the Reid branch come Naomi Reid Harrison, Dean of Women at St. Paul Polytechnic Institute, Lawrenceville, Virginia; Albert T. Reid of the University of Chicago is the recipient of a medical research fellowship granted by the Public Health Service and recommended by the National Cancer Institute. He will investigate problems of diffusion controlled reaction in metabolizing systems; Mrs. Charlotte Reid Rodman U. S. O. worker in Portsmouth, Virginia; Hazel Jennings Hagans, teacher in the State School for Deaf and Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina; Persis Jennings, Art teacher in the Norfolk Division of Virginia State College, Norfolk, Virginia; Lucille Reid Segre', teacher of Home Eco-



THE FOUR REID BROTHERS AND THEIR WIVES
LEFT TO RIGHT, BOTTOM, MRS. JACOB REID, DECEASED; MRS. JOHN THOMAS REID; MRS. ALBERT O. REID, DECEASED; AND MRS. WILLIAM E. REID. LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP, ATTORNEY JACOB REID; REV. JOHN THOMAS REID, DECEASED; DR. ALBERT O. REID; AND DR. WILLIAM EDWARD REID, DECEASED.



THE GREENE BRANCH OF THE FAMILY AT THE 1951 REUNION AT HOBBSVILLE, N. CAR.
LEFT TO RIGHT: MRS. WALTER GREENE, FRANCINE SKEETER, RAYMOND COPELAND, LEROY LANGSTON, MRS. EDNA GREENE HALL, MRS. ULYSSEES BUTLER, MRS. BEULAH LANGSTON COPELAND AND MISS CARMEN HARRIS.
FOREGROUND: NORFLEET HALL, JR.

nomics, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana; Marion Reid, public school teacher in Baltimore, Maryland; Cora Mae Reid, Nursery School Teacher, Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Claudia Reid, Murfreesboro, North Carolina public school teacher; Thomas H. Reid, Sr. Portsmouth, Virginia

Attorney; Dr. Leon Reid, Jr., Richmond, Virginia Dentist; Dr. Fergusson Reid, St. Louis, Missouri Physician; Jacob L. Reid, Roanoke, Virginia Attorney; Dr. Albert O. Reid, Baltimore, Maryland Dentist; Rev. Clayton Reid of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; William Reid, Beckley, West Virginia high

school principal; Edna Reid Bland, Newark, New Jersey Social Worker; Clara Reid Willis, Public Relations Secretary at Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Simon Clester Reid, New York City letter carrier; Mable Reid Jennings, Victoria, Virginia school teacher, Dr. Russell E. Reid, Newport News, Virginia Physician and Dr. William E. Reid, Physician for over fifty years in Portsmouth, Virginia, who died June, 1952.

From the Reid-Jones branch come Rev. R. Irving Boone of Wilmington, North Carolina and Rev. Brodie Leroy Boone of Winsor, North Carolina.

From 1799, until the present time, these people have met the problems and obstacles of a minority group. Having stability of family life has no doubt increased their ability to face not only the years following the American Revolution, financial panics, displacement of mechanics and artisans, industrial jolts and agricultural crises, but also the Civil War, the Reconstruction, the years of political impotence for the Negro and the slow but steady cultural and social isolation of the Negro from the rest of the citizens of the United States.

Contributing to their ability to exist under these conditions with a working amount of emotional and mental health was their Jack-of-all-trades dexterity and its consequent carry-over into other fields of endeavor.

In the good old days before Hinton R. Helper's "The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It," and before its influence was felt, the boys and young men in this group learned from fathers, uncles and other relatives at least two trades and some could handle efficiently as many as five different trades.

This group of relatives along with thousands of other Negroes remains bewildered at the unchristian attitude of many of the majority group, especially after having through the decades been industrious in labor, diligent in duty



REID FAMILY—THREE SISTERS AND BROTHER L. TO R., LUCILE REID SEGRE, DR. RUSSELL E. REID, CHARLOTTE REID RODMAN AND CORNELIA REID JONES.



A GROUP OF RELATIVES AT THE 1951 FAMILY REUNION.

toward family, state and nation and loyal to the good causes of society.

It was only after several decades of political maneuvering, resulting in social isolation, that all Negroes now know that if not unwanted, they are—in different degrees in various sections of America—just tolerated.

The following passage in John H. Franklin's introduction to his most helpful book was a definite influence in the development of conclusions reached about the history of this group.

The passage reads: "We often get our cues for the present from the past. . . . If many of our problems of racial adjustment had their origin in the difficult atmosphere of slavery, they present certain psychological factors that would have been different had they begun in an atmosphere of freedom, difficult though that might have been immediately after the Civil War."

For further guidance in crystalizing ideas in this conclusion we quote from the introduction of Gunnar Myrdal's "An American Dilemma."

"The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American."

As the early members of this family group attained the age to realize their cultural, social and political isolation, they were able to stand up and wrestle with their peculiar problems as all Americans must with theirs.

However, these people were a small minority within a larger minority. Most of the free Negroes in the cities, the unassimilated Indians, the poor whites and most Negro slaves received less attention and their treatment was seldom so benign.

With all the wrestling done by this and other similar groups to close the cultural, social, economic and political gap between themselves and the majority group—the gap is still too wide. The moral aspect of the problem in the hearts of Americans has only been tentatively probed.



1951 FAMILY REUNION AT HOBBSVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA
LEFT TO RIGHT: MRS. CORA SMITH, MRS. CORNELIA REID, LEONARD S. JONES, JR., MRS. WALTER REYNOLDS, MISS BEULAH BURKE, DR. MARGARET SMITH AND DR. CHARLES SMITH.



1949 FAMILY REUNION AT MURFREESBORO, NORTH CAROLINA
SEATED LEFT TO RIGHT: MRS. J. EUGENE REID, MRS. EVA MINTER BUTLER, RUTH BUTLER, GLORIA REID (HOLDING THOMASINE BEVERLY), MAUDE JONES SYKES AND MRS. CLAUDIA REID REID. STANDING LEFT TO RIGHT: J. EUGENE REID, DAVID BUTLER, TWO OF THE JAMES GIRLS, MRS. AMAZA BUTLER ARCHER AND MRS. GUSSIE BUTLER JAMES.

COVER

Dr. William Edward Reid of Portsmouth, Va., who died in June 1952, was responsible for much of the information concerning "The Four Rooks Sisters" and their descendants.