

Miles Lassiter, An Early African American Quaker: Slave or Free?

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The Beginning

Most of us start our genealogical quest with our family traditions of where we came from. Sometimes we have a lot of information, but sometimes we have very limited information. My mother had very little by way of oral tradition regarding her maternal family. Still, it is a maxim in genealogy that one should work backwards, from the known to the unknown. With that in mind I began my search with my mother and what she knew about her family.

The oral tradition

Margaret Lilly (Lee) Williams was born in 1914 in Lynchburg, Virginia, but never actually lived there. She lived in Greensboro, Guilford County, North Carolina until she was about five years old. Her sister Elverna Elizabeth “Vern,” was born there in March 1918. Their mother, Elinora (Phillips) Lee died just six months later on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, in the great Flu pandemic. Their grandmother, Mary Louise “Louise” (Smitherman) Phillips Floyd Ingram, whom they called “Mama” took them to live in Elizabeth, Union County, New Jersey, where several of her other children lived. However they moved to Asheboro, Randolph County (about 35 miles south of Greensboro), North Carolina in 1920 when Louise’s mother, Ellen Smitherman Mayo, suffered a stroke and subsequently died. They remained in Asheboro for a couple of years, but moved back to New Jersey around 1923. My mother lived there until she married my father in 1935 and they moved to New York City. Her grandmother died and was buried in New Jersey in 1936.

My mother had a number of fond memories of her great grandmother, Ellen Smitherman Mayo, whom she called, “Grandma Ellen.” However, she did not know her maiden name or who her parents were. So that was my first task, to find out what I could about Grandma Ellen.

The Research

Vital Records

A request was made from the State of North Carolina for Grandma Ellen’s death certificate. In a pre-9-11 world this was not a particularly difficult task. Although it is harder now and the rules more stringent, it is still possible. The request returned a certificate that named her parents:

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*Nancy Lassiter and Calvin Dunson.*¹ Although my mother said she did not recognize those names, it was “Mama” Louise who was the informant, so I was reasonably confident that the information was accurate.

A request for “Mama” Louise’s death certificate was made to the State of New Jersey. It identified *Anderson Smitherman* as her father.²

A request was made also to the Clerk of the Court for Randolph County for the marriage certificate for Ellen Dunson and Smitherman. The Register of Deeds returned an 1865 marriage certificate for Ellen Dunson and Anderson Smitherman.³ There was no certificate, however, for the marriage of Calvin Dunson and Nancy Lassiter.

Census

Since Grandma Ellen’s parents’ names had been identified as Calvin and Nancy (Lassiter) Dunson, and I knew that Ellen had married Anderson Smitherman in 1865, I could now begin to search for them in the census. I looked for them first in the 1880 census. I found Nancy Dunson without Calvin but with some of her children and grandchildren.⁴ I also found Ellen and Anderson Smitherman, but Louise was not in the house since she was married by that time.⁵ In the 1870 census, the first post-Emancipation census, I found Ellen and Anderson Smitherman with Mary L(ouise).⁶ I also found Calvin and Nancy.⁷

Since I didn’t know if the family was free before Emancipation, I looked for Calvin and Nancy in the 1860 census. I found them with Ellen as a young girl.⁸ This was a **FREE FAMILY OF COLOR**. So what about 1850? A search of the 1850 census showed Nancy Lassiter in the home of an older Free Man of Color, named Miles Lassiter⁹ (and two other households of Free People of Color named Lassiter nearby: Wiley and Jack).

I continued to search the 1840 census, but did not find his name there. Since only heads of household were listed, it was possible that he was living in someone else’s household, even if he was free, which I had no way of knowing at that point. Since he was somewhat elderly in 1850, I decided to look in the 1830 census, just in case he was the head of his own household. **There he was, free in 1830!**¹⁰

There is no 1820 census still available for Randolph County, and he would have been too young most likely to be a head of household in 1810. There were no Lassiters of color noted any earlier in the 1810 or any other early census.

Researching Free People of Color

Because Free People of Color had legal standing, they were able to participate in legal transactions, such as land purchases. Since Miles was free in the 1850 and 1830 censuses it was time to research other records to see if information about him could be found.

Church Records

There were a large number of members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Randolph County, North Carolina, so out of curiosity I looked in Hinshaw's *Encyclopedia of Quaker Genealogy*. There was a **Miles Lassiter**, who requested membership in 1845. Clearly this was a **Free Man**, but there was no mention of his race/color.¹¹

Land Records

Meantime, I requested copies of deeds in Grandma Ellen's name. There were some, **but** it turned out **not** the house **in** Asheboro. That house belonged to Charlie Mayo. Her land was in the **country**, in an area called, the **Lassiter Mill Community**. A notation on each of the deeds said the properties were part of the "**Division of Lands of Miles Lassiter**." This definitely showed that Ellen was one of his descendants. In the deeds she was selling the land to, *Will and Colon Lassiter* (probable relatives).¹²

A Research Journey

In 1982 after discussions with a Randolph County historian, I learned about a Lassiter family of color still living in Lassiter Mill area. The names she gave me matched my census research I made a phone call and talked to Kate Lassiter Jones. Her grandfather (Colier Lassiter) and my great great great grandmother (Nancy Lassiter) were brother and sister.

The Journey

My mother and I made the trip to North Carolina, where we met cousins we never knew, saw a community we had never seen, and learned this was my ancestral home. While there, Will Lassiter, who bought Grandma Ellen's land, showed me where it was.

I also learned that the family there knew that they had an ancestor Miles. They also knew that there was a Quaker connection, but they only knew about their grandfather, Colier, being a Quaker, nothing about Miles being Quaker. Some thought his wife *might* have been a Sarah, but Harold Lassiter said her name was "something like, 'Hildy.'" As for his freedom, **they had been told Miles was freed in the 1790s.**

Continued Research

Quaker Records

An inquiry to the **Friends Historical Collection at Guildford College** returned information that Miles was formally accepted into Back Creek Meeting. Technically he was a member of Uwharrie Meeting, which was a "Preparatory" Meeting, located on what is now Lassiter Mill Road, about a mile north of the present day Lassiter family property.¹³ So, **Miles Lassiter was**

officially a Quaker! But, again, there was **no** mention of his color or race. In fact no one at the library had any idea he was a man of color.

Land Records

According to the 1850 census, Miles Lassiter owned \$590 worth of Real Property. While in North Carolina I looked for deeds. I found a deed in his name **dated 1815 for the purchase of 100 acres,**¹⁴ but he **sold it in 1826 with co-grantor, Sarah Lassiter,** (the same 100 acres) to *Henry Newby, a Quaker.*¹⁵ No other purchases were noted. Again, there was no mention of his color or status. It could be surmised, of course, that **since he was purchasing land he must be a Free Man of Color.** I was not certain why Sarah Lassiter was a co-grantor or what her relationship was.

There was no evidence that he bought any other land. However, according to the 1850 census, he owned land. Additionally there was land ultimately divided that Grandma Ellen inherited, but **what land?????**

Probate Records

A Randolph County *Journal* article titled "Phillips Heirs" named all the children associated with Miles: Emsley, Abigail, Colier, Wiley, Susannah, **Nancy,** & Jane. The probate record referenced called them "Phillips or Lassiter." I traced the record back to **Will Book 10** circa 1854.¹⁶

Back to the Census

In revisiting the 1840 census I noted that there was a free family of color headed by *Heley Phillips.*¹⁷ When comparing the household configuration of Heley Phillips in 1840 with the household of Miles in 1830, I noticed that they matched well for age and gender. Was this truly his wife? In the probate record all of the children were identified as Phillips as well as Lassiter. Since children of a Free Woman of Color would usually have her surname, it is not surprising that these children were identified as Phillips. On the other hand, if Miles is the husband and free then the children would likely have his surname. They seemed to have the name only secondarily.

Another Journal article

I had been pondering the question of what land Miles owned in 1850 when the *Journal* of the Randolph County Genealogical Society ran a series on the travel journals of *Thomas Newby* during his visit from Indiana in 1857, North Carolina. He commented he visited with **Calvin** (it more likely actually said **Calier**) **Lassiter "Where Father Used to live."**¹⁸ His father was **Henry Newby,** the same Henry Newby to whom Miles sold his land in 1826. Henry Newby apparently returned the land to Miles when he went west to Indiana. However, the Probate entry indicates that it was somehow considered **Healy's** land legally. **WHY?**

Slave or Free

Miles was Free wasn't he? Almost everything that had been discovered to this point seems to confirm that Miles was a free man of color. Only three things raised significant questions. **First**, when Miles sold his land in 1826, there was a co-signer. **Second**, the children had Healy's last name (Phillips) and only secondarily Miles' name. **Third**, Healy was head of household in 1840.

A free man of color?

Court Records

In the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Minutes, an 1807 entry named Miles Lassiter, Jack Lassiter, and Samuel Lassiter to a Road Crew for the Fayetteville Road.¹⁹ It is assumed that they were **Free**, because if had been slaves they would not need to be formally sent by the courts, their owners would simply send them out there when they wished. Besides – **there was no mention of color or status**

Land Records

He seemed to be **Free** when he bought land in 1815 and sold it in 1826. After all, slaves had no legal standing. They were themselves property and could not purchase property. However, there was this curious thing that he **bought** it in his own name, but **sold** it with a **co-grantor**, Sarah Lassiter. Sarah was **white, and there is no** indication that she was a Quaker. Most of the family's records indicate they were Methodist.

Census Records

He seemed to be **Free** in **1830** in the census, BUT the 1840 census had Healy's name. He was definitely **Free** in the **1850** census. Everything seemed to indicate he was **Free**. **However**, it was not completely clear because . . .

Or slave?

Court Records

In **1840**, in the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter minutes, there appeared an order to issue the Letters of Administration for **Sarah Lassiter**. This was not unusual. **However**, on the same day were issued Letters of Administration for **Ezekiel Lassiter**²⁰ and his **ONLY** Property were three slaves: **Miles Lassiter, Jack Lassiter, and Samuel Lassiter**.²¹

Probate Records

A look into the Will books showed that **Healy** bought **Miles** for \$0.05; **Colier** bought **Jack** for \$12.50; but poor **Samuel** went to **Sawney Cranford (a Quaker)** for \$262.25, because he had run

away, was apprehended in Raleigh, and the debt to retrieve him had to be paid. There has been no indication he ever actually lived at Cranford's, and it has been assumed that he was probably set free shortly thereafter.²²

The Quaker Connection

One night, after tossing around several theories, while surfing the internet an article appeared from the *Journal of Negro History* about **BLACK QUAKERS**, and it named **Miles Lassiter!** It mentioned his **OBITUARY** was in *Friends Review*, a prominent Quaker journal. A copy was obtained from the Library of Congress.²³ It answered almost ALL my questions!

The Obituary

The obituary in *Friend's Review*²⁴ gave the following information. The names of individuals referenced therein, but not explicitly stated were matched with other research and are listed in parentheses.

Miles Lassiter was born a *slave*

His slave owner died (*Ezekiel Lassiter*)

The owner's will said that Miles would be in the control of his widow (*Sarah*) until her death then revert to the estate and be sold

It said he was married to a **Free woman** (*Healy*)

It said he was Sarah's *business manager*

It said that together with his *wife's* resourcefulness they had amassed a **large amount of land**

It said his wife *bought his freedom*

It said he was **THE ONLY BLACK QUAKER in NC** at the time of his death **22 June 1850**

Private Papers

This all agreed with, and expanded on, a **January 1851** letter from *Jonathan Worth*, a local Quaker lawyer, Manumission Society member, and North Carolina Governor, preserved by Harold Lassiter (brother to Will and Colon). It was written for *Colier Lassiter* specifically addressing the inherited land,²⁵ and said:

Healy (Helia) was free

She was married to a *slave*

They had **7 children**

Together they had acquired **a lot of property**

She died about **5 years before** that (circa 1845)

He died in the **summer of 1850**

And, for good measure, a new Brick Wall

She had been *married before*
AND had **4 other children –un-named!!!**

Summary of Research Resources

A review of this study shows the varied types of records that can be used when researching Free People of Color or Slaves. They are listed below.

Free People of Color

Oral Tradition
Vital Records: Marriages
Census Records: Free Schedules
Land Records
Court Records: Registers of Free People
Probate Records
Private Papers
Newspapers, Obituaries, Publications

Slave Research

Oral Tradition
No Vital Records
Census: Not usually – possibly enumerated in slave schedules
Land Records – not usually, unless as a sale
Court Records – possibly in court minutes: work contracts; trials
Probate Records – especially in inventories and final distributions or accounts of sales
Private Papers – letters, diaries, bibles, plantation journals
Newspapers might run notices of slave sales with descriptions, even names; runaway notices

After you finish your research

SHARE! SHARE! SHARE!

¹North Carolina Death Certificate #16225-404, Ellen Dunson, Certificate in possession of the author. See also Randolph County Death Record Book 7:6, F(amily) H(istory) L(ibrary) M(icrofilm) #0475244.

² Bureau of Vital Statistics, NJ Certificate and Record of Death (Trenton, NJ: State of New Jersey), Registered #436C. Mrs. Louise Ingram

³ Anderson Smitherman and Ellen Dunson, Marriage Book 2:71. Certified copy.

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- ⁴ 1880 US Census, population schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Nancy Dunson, New Hope Township, S.D. 2, E.D. 223, p. 1, dwelling 2, family 3. NAM #T9-978.
- ⁵ 1880 US Census, population schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Anderson Smitherman, New Hope Township, S.D. 2, E.D. 223, p. 3 [stamped p. 185], dwelling 18, family 20. NAM #T9-978.
- ⁶ 1870 US Census, population schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Anderson Smitherman, Union Township, P.O. Asheboro, p. 9, line 1, dwelling and family 63. NAM #M593-1156. See also Register of Deeds, Randolph County NC Marriage Registers (Asheboro, NC: Randolph County). Samuel Phillips and Louisa Smitherman
- ⁷ 1870 US Census, population schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Calvin Dunson, New Hope Township, P.O. Lassiter's Mill, p. 10, line 9, dwelling 80, family 83. NAM #M593-1156.
- ⁸ 1860 US Census, free schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Calvin Dunson, West Division, P.O. Asheboro, p. 148, line 17, dwelling 1098, family 1083. NAM #M653-910.
- ⁹ 1850 US Census, free schedule, Randolph County, North Carolina, Miles Lassiter, Ashborough Township, Southern Division, p. 136, dwelling 808 (803), family 817 (811). It says that Miles, Samuel and Jane can read and write. N(ational) A(rchives) M(icrofilm) #M432-641, and FHLM #444654, item 2.
- ¹⁰ 1830 US Census, Randolph County, North Carolina, Miles Lassiter, p. 7. NAM #M19-125.
- ¹¹ William Wade Hinshaw, Encyclopedia of Quaker Genealogy, 1750-1930 (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company) Back Creek Monthly Meeting, I:723.
- ¹² Estate of Miles Lassiter/Charles and Ellen Mayo to Will Lassiter and Colon Lassiter, Deed Book 166:91, FHLM #0470286; and Colon C. Lassiter to Ellen Mayo, Deed Book 163:264, FHLM #0470285.
- ¹³ Carole Treadway, bibliographer, Friends Historical Collection, Guilford College, Greensboro, NC, to Margo Williams, dated 30 Oct 1987 and 25 Nov 1987.
- ¹⁴ Jesse Morgan to Miles Lassiter, Deed Book 13:402 (FHLM #0019634 or #0470228).
- ¹⁵ Sarah Lassiter and Miles Lassiter to Henry Newby, Deed Book 17:256.(FHLM #0019636 or #0470229).
- ¹⁶ "Phillips Heirs," *The Genealogical Journal, the Randolph County Genealogical Society*, VI (Winter 1982): 51-52.
- ¹⁷ 1840 US Census, Randolph County, North Carolina, Heley Phillips, p. 65. NAM #M704-369.
- ¹⁸ "Thomas Newby Diary, Part VII," *The Genealogical Journal by the Randolph County Genealogical Society*, 4 (Fall 1981): 29-30.
- ¹⁹ Road maintenance assignment, 1807 Minutes of the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions. FHLM #0470210.
- ²⁰ Letters of Administration: Sarah Lassiter and Ezekiel Lassiter, and Order to sell slaves, February 1840, Minutes of the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions FHLM #0019652 or #0470211.

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- ²¹ Letters of Administration: Sarah Lassiter and Ezekiel Lassiter, and Order to sell slaves, February 1840, Minutes of the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions FHLM #0019652 or #0470211. See also Will Book 7: (Sarah and Ezekiel) Inventory, 303; (Sarah) Account, 331; (Ezekiel) Account, 332; (Sarah and Ezekiel) Final Distribution of the Estate, 406. FHLM #0019643.
- ²² Sarah and Ezekiel Lassiter Inventory, Will Book 7: 303; (Sarah) Account, 331; (Ezekiel) Account, 332; (Sarah and Ezekiel) Final Distribution of the Estate, 406. FHLM #0019643.
- ²³ Henry Cadbury, "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends" (Part 1), *Journal of Negro History*, 21, 151-213. (1936), <<http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/qwhp.htm>>.
- ²⁴ Obituary of Miles Lassiter (1850), *Friends' Review*, III:700
- ²⁵ Statement of J.Worth, regarding the consultation by Calier Phillips about the division of the estate of Helia Phillips. From: Harold Lassiter Private Papers.