

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Kirby E. Sutton (Part 12)

Merchant, traveling salesman, wholesaler and farmer, Kirby Edward Sutton (1866-1930) was a prominent Bucklesberrian of considerable wealth and influence. As successful as he was, his life included a number of mysteries.

For example, Kirby owned at least two houses, but he may not have lived at either one. On his Bucklesberry plantation was a large, two-story house. He also built a house in La Grange, which he gifted or sold to his great-niece, Julia Evelyn Sutton Suggs (1921-2013) and husband, Alton Suggs (1923-1994). The house still stands at 319 South Caswell Street.

Oddly, Kirby was not living at these properties when the Census was taken in 1900, 1910, and 1920. Rather, he was a boarder at the Fields Hotel in La Grange all three time periods. Kirby never married and had no known children. Perhaps he reasoned that, with no immediate dependents, he did not need to maintain a traditional home.

Another mystery is the abrupt end to Kirby's extraordinary farming career when he was only 52 years of age, resulting in the sale of his 1,200-acre farm. Journalist, James O. Guthrie (*The Wilmington Morning Star*) described Kirby's farm in 1918 as one of the finest, most profitable farms in the eastern part of the State. Kirby apparently downsized his massive farm by half the following year, although it is unknown how or why. In 1919, the Atlantic Coast Realty Company purchased the balance of Kirby's farm totaling 630 acres for \$75,000 (*The Kinston Free Press*), which was subdivided and auctioned as smaller farms over the next two years.

A number of factors could have contributed to Kirby selling his farm. Perhaps it was impending illness or failing health. Reportedly not serious, Kirby was nonetheless hospitalized with influenza in February, 1919 (*The Kinston Free Press*), the same month he sold his farm. He was hospitalized a second time with influenza in 1923.

In 1918, Kirby served as the Lenoir County chief registrar for the World War I selective draft. Maybe this important work required more of his time and attention than anticipated, which could have prevented him from being able to effectively manage his large plantation.

Another explanation for the sudden halt to Kirby's sterling farming career may have been the emotional strain of the unexpected and unusual death of one his tenants the year before he sold his farm:

1918, July 22: "John Sutton, 22, colored, [committed] suicide on the farm of Mr. Kirby Sutton near La Grange Sunday forenoon. Sutton shot himself with a pistol. It is understood that he had quarreled with his mother over his breakfast. He had threatened to shoot the woman. Sutton was of a morose disposition, and many times had remarked that he intended to die with his shoes on.....the suicide was seen by persons on the farm." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

One other mystery has to do with Kirby's destitute state at the end of his life. Accounts from current Bucklesberry locals whose relatives were alive during Kirby's latter years report that he died virtually penniless. His estate file confirms that he left a paltry \$30.77 in his bank account, which paid final receipts, including \$7.04 to his sister, Elizabeth (Bettie) Ann Sutton (1868-1945) to apply toward his funeral expenses.

Kirby was a savvy businessman and was invested in stocks. In all likelihood, the historic market crash of 1929 that occurred the year before his passing was the cause of his financial demise.

With his good character intact, Kirby died January 22, 1930 of arteriosclerosis (heart disease) which he battled for more than three years, per his death certificate. Nephew, Finley Parrott Sutton (1897-1959) notified authorities that Kirby had died. He is buried at Fairview Cemetery in La Grange.