

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

S. I. Sutton (Part 4)

Changing careers at least once in a lifetime is not unusual for typical folks today. Those who are uncertain of their place in the world of work may switch jobs several times within the first few years of adulthood alone. In nineteenth century Bucklesberry, however, even one career change would have been rare, since farming was the sole livelihood for almost everyone in the South.

Born with club foot and reared without the comfort and nurturing of a two-parent home, Samuel Ivey Sutton (1834–1904) was a gifted individual who changed career fields numerous times during his life, all with success. With no formal education, and having overcome many disadvantages, S.I. could be viewed as a true, nineteenth century Renaissance man.

For much of his adult life, S.I. was a custodian of the land. Born and reared in Bucklesberry, it should be no surprise that S.I. began his career as a farmer. The 1850 Census for Lenoir County named sixteen-year old Ivey (or S.I.) as the only member in the Thomas Sutton household. Purported to have been S.I.'s father, Thomas was listed as a farmer, as was S.I. Apparently, they were sharecroppers, as the Census indicated they owned no farm land that year.

S.I. was blessed with good fortune soon after the turn of the 1850 decade. Grantor index records identify 14 property transactions in Lenoir County between 1853 and 1860 that included S.I.'s name. In eight of these, he was the grantee. Yet, an unexplained move away from Bucklesberry and Lenoir County in 1860 found S.I., age 26, his wife of seven years, Mary Jane Uzzell, and their four young children as residents of Jones County, according to the Census. There his occupation was also listed as farmer.

By 1862, however, S.I. and family apparently had moved back to Bucklesberry. Whether he immediately resumed his farming career is uncertain. But it appears S.I. experienced his first career change during this period of time. He became an educator of sorts by offering tutorial services, perhaps as a means of supplementing his farming income. In the Clellan Sutton Collection of Bucklesberry papers are ten receipts, all dated 1862 to 1866, for tuition paid by Annie Hill Sutton to S.I. for the instruction of her three youngest children, Julius, Junius, and Christiana.

Given limited transportation during that era, Annie, a widow residing in the heart of Bucklesberry, would have been unable to travel the long distance with her children to Jones County to avail herself of S.I.'s educational services, if he and his family were still living there. Similarly, the long back-and-forth commute from Jones County to Bucklesberry to provide tutoring would have been an impossible feat for S.I. It stands to reason, then, that S.I. and Mary

must have relocated their family back to the Bucklesberry area no later than 1862, the date of the first tuition receipt bearing S.I.'s name.

Most interesting, one of the ten tuition receipts, dated 1863, was for tuition paid to Jerry (Jeremiah) Sutton, Jr. of Bucklesberry. However, the payment was receipted by S.I., suggesting a possible, innovative partnership or collaborative educational service that Jerry and S.I. may have operated together. Both men would have been young adults in their mid- to late-twenties at the time. We do not know how long S.I. worked as an educator beyond the five-year period indicated on the receipts, how much of it was part- or full-time work, or the extent of his services, whether an individual effort or a possible enterprise with local cousin, Jerry.

Oddly enough, and totally inconsistent with what most would expect as an essential qualification for an educator, was a notation in the 1870 Census that S.I., wife, Mary, and children all were illiterate. The columns labeled, "Education... cannot read; cannot write," were checked by the Census taker, which begs the question of how S.I. could have competently delivered instruction to Annie Hill's children, if he was illiterate. This was likely an error by the 1870 Census taker, as the following 1880 Census did not indicate illiteracy markings for S.I.

Whether S.I. had ceased from offering tutoring-educational services altogether during the latter part of the 1860s, or whether he provided tutoring to locals intermittently, remains a mystery. Nonetheless, it is significant that S.I. may well have been one of the first paid instructors among the Bucklesberry Suttons. His service as an educator was a reflection of his entrepreneurial spirit and dedication to his Bucklesberry kin in curbing widespread illiteracy.

The 1870 Census for Lenoir County lists S.I.'s occupation yet again as farmer. From the mid-1800s to the early-1890s, however, S.I. changed jobs several times. He worked as Magistrate, U.S. Postmaster, Justice of the Peace, and finally, railroad-express agent for the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad, the position he held until his death in 1904. These will be discussed at length in the next article.