

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Alexander Richard Sutton (Part 4)

Not many nineteenth century rural American children were celebrities. Alexander Richard Sutton (1860-1928) of La Grange, though, could have claimed this status. In a sensational 1862 news report published widely across the State, nine-year-old Alex was arrested in a huge raid with seventeen others, some of whom were adults.

Citing no evidence against them for horse stealing, Alex and two comrades were exonerated by Superior Court Judge Charles Randolph Thomas on the second day of the hearing. They were promptly released. The extent of childhood trauma that Alex probably experienced as a result of the unjustifiable arrest may never be known. But with strength of character, he moved forward with his life.

Not until adulthood did Alex's name emerge again in public records. The 1880 Census identified him as a nineteen-year-old farmer in the Institute area of Lenoir County with his wife Hulda Hooker Hardy Sutton (1862-1928). Married the year before on November 23, they were living in the household of Hulda's widowed mother Rosa Hardy.

When the Census was taken in June, 1880, Hulda was pregnant with their first child Edward Lathan Sutton (1880-1970), born August 28. Six more children were eventually added to the couple's family over the next twenty years: Leon Benjamin Sutton, Sr. (1883-1964), Alex Kirby David Sutton (1887-1959), Alice Cornelia Sutton Howard (1891-1993), Burl Owen Sutton (1893-1897), Pearl Sutton (1895-1895; lived only five days), and Murial Hadley Sutton Woodard (1898-1973).

With access to family records, Alex's grandniece Marjorie Sutton Oliver (1933-2016) included a brief biographical of Alex's life in her 1974 book, *The Suttons of England and North Carolina, U.S.A. 1720-1974*. She noted that, sometime after the 1880 Census, Alex and Hulda relocated and "lived across from Alex's father's home at Falling Creek where they farmed" (p. 46).

Alex had multiple vocational interests. In addition to farming, he entered into a cotton gin partnership with John Daniel Walters (1858-1933) before 1883. A fire occurred at the gin later that year:

1883, December 9: "Wednesday evening [December 5] about sunset the [cotton] gin house of Alex Sutton and J. D. Walters in this place [La Grange] was found to be on fire. The fire company, the entire male population of La Grange, was on hand in less than five minutes with

buckets and the fire was soon put out. The cotton caught from a match passing through the gin and at once went to the lint room, and nothing but cool judgment and hard work saved the gin from being burned up. Capt. Davis' School, professors and all, were on hand and rendered good service." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

Whether Alex's and John's gin operation fully recovered from the fire of 1883 is uncertain. Something about the cotton gin site, however, sparked the interest of Col. Adam Clark Davis, Jr. (1858-1952), possibly during the firefighting effort. He later bought the property:

1886, May 5: "Col. Davis has purchased the piece of ground on which the old [cotton] gin house of Sutton and Walters stood. The house is being taken down and gin fixtures, engine, etc. removed..." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

More about the life of Alexander Richard Sutton will be shared in a future Bucklesberry article.