

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Big Move, Short Life

Five of the earliest Bucklesberry documents in the Clellan Sutton Collection, all dated in the mid-1700s, either name John Sutton directly or reasonably can be attributed to him. Previous articles in this series identified John Sutton from Bertie County as the first Sutton to arrive in the Bucklesberry pocosin of old Dobbs County, from which Lenoir County was later named.

Although we are unsure of the exact year of his arrival, John was likely a young man in his early- to mid-twenties when he touched base in then-swampy Bucklesberry. Further, we are uncertain what prompted his move from Bertie County, whether for greater opportunity, access to more farmland, family disagreement, or other motivation.

What we do know is that John's relocation to old Dobbs County was no small feat, in light of the fact that horse-and-wagon was the only mode of transportation at the time. The estimated distance between Bucklesberry of the Merry Hill area in Bertie County, where John was born and reared, and Bucklesberry of the La Grange area, was approximately 100 miles.

Author-educator, Terry Burns, noted that a person could travel 15 to 25 miles a day using a horse-drawn wagon; therefore, it would have taken John about 4 to 7 days to traverse a 100-mile distance in the best of environmental conditions. However, given the rough, unsettled and mostly wooded terrain of the time, it probably took him much longer. Combined with all the uncertainties he undoubtedly faced, this was an arduous trek and a big move for John, to say the least, and speaks to his steadfast character and dedication in advancing his life and that of his family.

Born circa 1730, we believe John Sutton died before 1773. Based on these estimated dates, John was possibly only 40 to 45 years of age when he passed away. Viewed in light of 21st century life expectancy standards, John did not live a very long life. The average life span for Americans as recently as 2010 was 78 years, according to a report provided by World Bank in 2012. By way of comparison, R. W. Fogel in 2004 analyzed the adverse effects of low-level diets on high-energy work required of typical 1775 early colonial American laborers, and determined their average life expectancy to be 53.5 years. John's interpolated, maximum age of 45, then, would have placed him approximately nine or more years below the average life expectancy, suggesting that he may have died prematurely.

With no available information on the cause of his death, we can surmise that John probably lived a relatively short life. We know that John was a farmer, as were virtually all early residents of old Dobbs County and greater eastern North Carolina at the time. He was clearly a hard worker, as farming in colonial America was much more challenging and difficult than current-day, mechanized farming. We can also conclude that John probably lived a hard life and likely battled health issues without the aid of a physician or medical intervention. John accepted the risks of

moving from a more settled and established Bertie County to the primitive old Dobbs County, which is reflective of an immensely strong individual with a daring and brave character.

The next article in this series will discuss John Sutton's family and farmland, including a 1763 land grant from King George III.

Caption for accompanying image:

Invoice-receipt for John Sutton with an estimated date before 1773, showing the sale of pork and corn in exchange for cash, salt, and cash on account. Document indicates John's early presence in Bucklesberry. From the Clellan Sutton Collection.

