

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Old Sutton Farm Land

Farming is an honorable profession. But veteran farmers will tell you that farming ain't what it used to be from many perspectives! One Bucklesberry Sutton farmer advised his children in the 1960s that he would be the last farmer in their long line, that the little bit of land he farmed (about 80 acres) was barely enough to pay bills and keep food on the table, that the farm was not big enough for them to farm with him, and that they would need to go to college after high school graduation and learn another way to make a living.

This wise farmer went on to say that small farmers would soon be a thing of the past. He was right, for the most part. Farmers today will tell you that leasing 1,000 or more acres of other local land to combine with their own farms of much less acreage may be needed in order to make it as a farmer.

Although farming continues to be a work option for some, it was the main occupation in early colonial North Carolina. The few colonists who occupied Bucklesberry in the mid-1700s had little else they could do for a living other than farm their own land. Survival was the goal in the largely rough, unsettled terrain of old Dobbs County.

One of the first to settle in the Bucklesberry community of Moseley Hall, later named, La Grange, was John Sutton, who migrated from Bertie County, NC. John continued the farming tradition of his ancestors. He and his young family worked hard to acquire farm land that would eventually be passed down to present-day generations of Suttons, some of whom continue to farm in Bucklesberry today.

John owned considerable land even by 21st century standards. He and his three known sons—Benjamin, John, Jr. and William—amassed significant land acreage that spanned north and south of the Neuse River, and from the Bear Creek area near Seven Springs eastward to the current Pot Neck and Falling Creek communities. Available deeds, deed abstracts, patents and surveys dated 1748 to 1773, some of which are found in the Clellan Sutton Collection, document at least eight transactions where John was granted land through purchase or gift. Four of these transactions specify exact acreage which totaled 610 acres of land.

The U.S. Census began recording the number of acres of land owned by farmers in 1850. John and his three known sons were deceased by 1850, precluding their mention in the Census. However, all of John's known male descendants who were of legal age and alive in 1850, beyond his three sons, were accounted for in the Census, some of whom were fourth-generation great-grandsons. All but one had obtained hundreds of acres of land through inheritance or purchase, collectively totaling an amazing 7,249 acres.

Benjamin Sutton's seven heirs, including five sons and two grandsons, owned 4,189 acres: Benjamin, Jr., 1,407 acres; Hardy, 960 acres; John, 437 acres; Thomas, 0 acres; grandson William, 735 acres; grandson, John Aldridge, 300 acres; and grandson Josiah, Sr. 350 acres. William Sutton's three heirs owned 2,260 acres: John, 910 acres; William (Old Billy), 1,100 acres; and grandson, John Fred Isler, 250 acres. Two of John Sutton, Jr.'s sons owned 800 acres: James, 300 acres; and William Isler, 500 acres.

The one John Sutton descendant of the twelve named in the Census who owned no acreage was Thomas, son of Benjamin. The Census records Thomas' occupation as farmer, so he apparently was a sharecropper. Nonetheless, we know Thomas owned some land in Bucklesberry during his early adult life. As with his four brothers, Thomas received property from his father, Benjamin, who gifted the land to his children prior to his death. Somehow, Thomas lost his inherited land. That said, according to Thomas' estate file of 1853, and subsequent to the 1850 Census, we know Thomas recovered from his apparent hardship and loss. His estate indicates he operated a successful mercantile store in eastern Wayne County until his death. Four deed abstracts, all dated 1853, also show that Thomas was able to obtain other land.

Incredibly, after more than 270 years, much of the land in current-day Bucklesberry accrued by John Sutton and his descendants has been passed down through the generations and remains in the possession of Sutton heirs. Clearly, the Sutton farmers of early Bucklesberry viewed their land as a precious commodity. They were highly protective of it, and strived to keep it in the family line by gifting. They also utilized the legal maneuver of life estate, by which land would automatically pass down to their heirs through the surviving widow. This practice continues today.