

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Settler John Sutton (Part 8)

Among Bucklesberry Pocosin's early settlers was John Sutton (ca. 1730-bef. 1773). Before his arrival in Lenoir County, then part of old Dobbs County, John was living in Bertie County, NC, his birthplace.

Interestingly, the Merry Hill area where he grew up was also called Bucklesberry Pocosin. Two communities with the same name, in the same time period and in the same geographic region is probably not happenstance.

The late genealogist and Bucklesberry Sutton descendant Martha Mewborn Marble (1944-2019) believed that Bucklesberry of old Dobbs County got its name from Bertie County. Associates of John, including the Herring family whose move from Bertie County to old Dobbs County preceded John's by a few years, may have been responsible for giving Bucklesberry its name.

John's relocation to old Dobbs County by 1750 was no small feat, when taking into account the primary mode of transportation was horse-drawn wagon. The estimated distance from Bucklesberry in the Merry Hill area of Bertie County to Bucklesberry of old Dobbs County was at least 100 miles.

Author-educator Terry Burns (www.terryburns.net) noted that individuals could potentially travel 15 to 25 miles a day using a horse-drawn wagon. In the best of environmental conditions, it would have taken John four to seven days to traverse 100 miles to old Dobbs County. However, given the rough, unsettled and mostly wooded terrain in eastern North Carolina back then, it probably took him considerably longer.

Author Frankie Wallace (www.history1700s.com) described the undeveloped infrastructure in the 1700s: "During this century, the lack of established roads and road maintenance meant that travel was particularly slow, as horse-drawn carriages traveled at a near-glacial pace along bumpy and unsteady roads. In the summer, the roads were dusty and difficult, and in the winter, the rain and snow made them sticky and muddy. During the worst four or five months of the year, wheeled vehicles kept off the roads entirely because they were mostly unusable." (no date; para. 4)

The move from his homeland of Bertie County, NC to unsettled Bucklesberry in old Dobbs County was one of the biggest challenges of John's life. Combined with the other uncertainties he faced, the exceedingly difficult journey required extraordinary strength and steadfast character.

A young man in his early twenties when he arrived in Bucklesberry, John was only about 40 to 45 years of age when he died. In light of current life expectancy standards, he lived a comparatively short life. The average life span for Americans in 2020 was 78.4 years, according to the World Health Organization.

In 2004, economic historian Robert W. Fogel analyzed the adverse effects of low-level diets on high-energy work required of typical 1775 early colonial American laborers. He determined their average life expectancy was about 53.5 years. John's interpolated maximum age of 45, then, would have placed him at least nine years below the average life expectancy at the time, an indication he may have died prematurely. No available information exists on the cause of John's death.

Additional information about John's short life and work as a settler will be shared in the next Bucklesberry article.