

# Slavery's Role in the History of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 1823—1872

A report by Gary R. Freeze

This project began in 2019 as part of the *Beloved Community* effort by St. Luke's Episcopal Church of Salisbury, North Carolina. *The goal was to learn more about and better understand the legacy of slavery and racism in the early history of the parish.* This local study was to be part of a national initiative by the Episcopal Church to acknowledge more fully its relationship to slavery in the past and advance racial reconciliation in its future. The initiative coincided with the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to the American colonies, in 1619. The project was made possible by a research grant provided by the Diocese of North Carolina. As the local historian and professor of history at Catawba College, I was enlisted to do the research and provide two presentations. The first was to be an oral briefing before the congregation, completed in winter 2020, and the second, this written report, was completed by summer 2021.

The scope of this project was to be both simple and comprehensive. No study of slavery in Rowan County had been done in more than a half century, and no piece of scholarship currently available provides a thorough understanding of the character of local slaveholding. Moreover, the existing historical treatments of St. Luke's hardly deal at all with the topic. *Very little was known about the extent to which church members owned slaves, how they behaved as slaveholders, and how they mixed their devotion as church members with their outreach to the religious needs of their slaves.* Further, hardly anything had ever been gleaned from local and parochial sources about the enslaved people themselves. In other words, their story remained untold in the annals of St. Luke's history and the traditions of Rowan County heritage.

The methodology that led to the following report blended both standard historical research techniques with innovative digital finding aids.

- I did a comprehensive search of available local records. Because Rowan County has always been so dedicated to preserving its historical record, most of the public documents—e.g., deeds, wills, court cases, etc.—are available either at the Rowan Public Library or the State Archives in Raleigh. Most helpful was the extensive abstraction of local land deeds, with an index that included listings of enslaved people. In addition, almost every family who lived in early Rowan County is the subject of a file in the history room of the library, as part of the McCubbins Collection. In the case of St. Luke's families, the files are often comprehensive in both written and oral

traditions. With this assemblage of local records, I was able to do a public document search for every known church member in the early years of St. Luke's. In addition, the digitization of North Carolina's historical newspapers provides a search engine that allows investigation by both name and subject. Thus, I was able to do two additional pieces of research that would have been daunting in the past, given the sporadic indexing of Salisbury's original newspapers. First, I could explore statewide mention of any prominent St. Luke's family. Second, I could explore the local character of slavery—particularly white perceptions about black people and their lives—by looking at all mentions of slavery in the available antebellum newspapers. Given the limited amount of information about particular attitudes toward slavery in so small a group of people as was early St. Luke's, these clippings provided a sounder context and broader application to the themes at hand.

- I dipped comprehensively into church records, at both the diocesan and parish levels. I explored particularly the antebellum *Journals* of the diocesan annual meetings, looking for two things: any mention of St. Luke's that named names or gave numbers—e.g., confirmations, baptisms, marriages, burials, often listed by race—and I made notes about the same information for other parishes in the diocese, as a means of gauging relative black involvement in church activities. At the parish level, I read all pages of the congregation record books, to determine the names, dates, etc., of both white and black congregants. I started with the first meager records in the 1830s and continued through the height of the Reconstruction years, when the few black members begin to disappear from the records.
- I turned to substantive analysis of a set of personal papers of one Church family at the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Henderson family papers in general provided a fleshing out of the subject matter with previously unknown anecdotal accounts.

All of these accounts figured substantially into the following report.

*What, then, did I find?*

- *Almost every early member of St. Luke's was intricately enmeshed in the slave system, either as large planters or as small-scale slaveholders. This was the case from the establishment in 1823 to the end of the Civil War in 1865. It included both the native born to Rowan and the newcomers from other areas of both the north and the south. In fact, of the more than thirty church members researched—the number is rounded because of some uncertainties in the parish records—only three nonslaveholders came into and remained a part of the church.*
- *St. Luke's most prominent families were the most prominent slaveholders in Rowan. In fact, I found that in some census years—when slaves were counted along with their masters—St. Luke's families made up as much as half of the large slaveholders in all of Rowan County. This was just as true for Salisbury, where I found St. Luke's families forming the core of the elite families in town. All depended upon slavery for their*

livelihoods, their credit arrangements, and the maintenance of their social position. Further, these families demonstrated both a paternalistic and pecuniary approach to the treatment of their slaves, as might be expected of people of faith in that time period. For example, I found no obvious physical mistreatment in court or other records, but Church men were just as likely as nonchurch men to buy and sell their slaves to settle financial accounts.

- *Local Episcopalians were slow to make strides to include slaves in the life of the parish*, relative to other churches in Rowan County and relative to other Episcopal parishes in the diocese. This may well have been a factor of the weak health of the congregation in its first twenty years of existence, from roughly 1823 to 1845. It could also have been a factor of which families were the core of the congregation at that time, although there is nothing evidential to make that conclusion. Whatever the cause of its initial shortcomings, St. Luke's did evolve a more encompassing presence of black participation in its congregational activities by the 1840s and 1850s. Then, surprisingly, black participation grew even faster during the years of the Civil War, only to dissipate into the general separation of the races during Reconstruction.

To reiterate, what I found was: that almost all of Salisbury's antebellum Episcopalians depended on their slaves for both the secular and sacred conditions of their physical lives, formed the core of the local slave owners' hegemony within the local area, and only slowly grew a Christian consciousness about the spiritual condition of their slaves over time. All of these findings contradict, to some extent, general perceptions that many people of today have about the Rowan County past: 1) that most congregations had a social range of members reflecting the community at large; 2) that slavery was a small and scattered presence in antebellum Rowan, and 3) that good Protestant Christians across the county charitably and extensively included their slaves in the formalities of worship. The following essay shall examine the gap between these perceptions and my findings.

## (1)

### **Slaveholding among Episcopalians**

The history of slavery in Rowan County was characterized by slow but steady growth in its scope and extent. That was the case from the establishment of the county in 1753 to the advent of the American Civil War in 1860. Within this pattern, as will be shown, the families of St. Luke's Episcopal Church played a central role in slavery's local perpetuation.

The first actual profile of slave holding is possible using the county tax lists of 1768. Most of the enslaved people belonged to whites who lived along the Great Wagon Road. The wealthiest planter in the whole county in that day was John Frohock, who lived where Livingstone College is located today, in what locals called "the mansion." He and his brother Thomas were listed with 25 slaves that year. As St. Luke's member John S. Henderson would explain in an earlier history of local Episcopalians, Frohock was in league with a group of men with Church of England backgrounds who were the true founders and sustainers of Salisbury

(and of the failed attempt to establish an active St. Luke's parish). This cabal, so to speak, was centered in James Carter, who surveyed the lots for the county seat in 1753, and John Dunn, the Irish attorney who most likely came up with Salisbury as the name for the new county seat. Their ally would be John Lewis Beard, the leading German in the community. The descendants of Frohock, Dunn, and Beard would be central to both slaveholding and the Episcopal establishment in the next half century.

By the time President George Washington visited Salisbury in 1795 only the size of slaveholding had changed, not the geographic scope. In 1800 the majority of the dozen largest slave owners in Rowan County lived in the borough of Salisbury. Most of these families later had a role in the reestablishment and growth of St. Luke's, including Lewis Beard (19 slaves that year), John Steele (26), Edward Yarborough (22), John Kelly (74), and the largest one of all, Spruce McCay (114). The latter two were owners of large parts of the old Frohock holdings.

Slavery grew more significantly after the War of 1812, when national markets became stronger. In 1820 the "borough" of Salisbury included the town and the Trading Ford area on the Yadkin River. A string of plantations belonging to the Archibald Hendersons, Steeles, McCays, Cowans, Yarboroughs and Kellys were on the streams that fed the river. Some families had both town and country residences. Significantly, 84 of the 87 households in the town "proper" owned slaves. More than half of the households in the edge of the borough also owned slaves. When St. Luke's was founded in 1823, the majority of residents in the borough were black. By the time the Episcopalians built their church in 1828, Salisbury had become an established bastion of slaveholding in western North Carolina. As a result, it was prospering as never before in its history.

(Here is a good place to note that church tradition says that the bricks used in the 1828 erection of the original sanctuary came from clay dug up at the nearby plantation of the John Steele family. Most likely, then, enslaved Africans produced the building blocks of the church. There are no records to collaborate the extent to which the enslaved participated in the actual construction project, although it would be unusual to not find enslaved laborers at least assisting the brick masons. It is also likely that slaves cut the timber that went into the woodwork for the interior of the sanctuary.)

Rowan's economic and ecumenical leap forward did not last. A long-term effort to make the Yadkin River navigable to coastal markets proved to be beyond the financial and technological abilities of local interests. As a result, by the late 1820s, prosperity in Salisbury grew stagnant, and the area along the Yadkin took years to recover. This occurred in exact correspondence with the very slow growth of St. Luke's as a congregation. Newcomers who would join St. Luke's by the 1830s had some difficulties staying put. Notable was James Martin, who would buy the Lewis Utzman house, now a part of the Rowan Museum. Martin, who owned 12 slaves in 1830, was one of the original male confirmands brought into the church in 1832. Judge Martin suffered economic reverses during the recession and by 1835 had determined to sell off his Rowan assets and move to Alabama. It may be the Martins that a bishop referenced when he noted that St. Luke's had its momentum dulled by the movement of one family to the west. Correspondingly, congregational records show very little

involvement in church life with black people during this period, with only one record of black involvement in the first ten years.

Despite slow growth years, the core set of families in St. Luke's remained wedded to slavery as a basis of their economic and social lives. In 1840, seven Rowan County planters owned more than 50 slaves each, an indication that they continued to put their wealth into the slave system. They included William S. McCay (114) at Milford; William Chambers (81) on Crane Creek; and "Mrs. [Archibald] Henderson's plantation" (71) on the creeks near the Great Road north of town. The St. Luke's delegates to the diocesan convention that year—John B. Lord, William Locke, Charles K. Wheeler, Charles A. Beard, and William Chambers—were all slaveholders.

The return of prosperity to Rowan County in the mid-1840s corresponds exactly with the growth of communicants within the St. Luke's congregation. And, as we will see below, this period corresponded to the development of an African-American presence in the congregation. Slaveholding, too, grew among church members. Of the ten richest Rowan residents in 1850, five—Charles F. Fisher, Nathaniel Boyden, Archibald Henderson, Margaret McCay, and David F. Caldwell—had connections to St. Luke's. At least half of their wealth was in human beings. The 1850s were by and large an even more prosperous decade, and the elites grew their wealth apace. In 1860 eight of the twelve wealthiest Salisburyians had connections to St. Luke's.

So, slaveholding remained ubiquitous and foundational to local Episcopalians throughout the decades that slavery was legal in the United States. The congregation was dominated by large slaveholders, and most other members at one time or another enslaved people. (I can find only two laymen in the whole period who were simply not slaveholders, compared to about thirty that were.)

What was that slaveholding like? What can we learn and what can we infer by investigating the known racial attitudes and actions of church members?

## (2)

### **Slaveholder Presumptions and Practices**

Earlier historians of Rowan County agreed on one thing about slavery: it was neither as prevalent nor oppressive as slavery in other places. Jethro Rumble, the minister of the Presbyterian Church, conducted research based upon oral traditions and interviews among white elite families. Here is what he said in the late 1870s, soon after the end of Reconstruction:

*The character of Rowan County slavery was generally mild and paternal. On a few plantations, probably, where a considerable number of slaves were quartered, and it was necessary to employ an overseer, there was severity of discipline, and hard labor . . . but even then the overtaken and underfed slaves had access to his master, either directly or through the young masters and mistresses, who felt a personal interest in the slave, and would raise such a storm and would raise such a storm . . . as would eventually secure . . .*

a kinder condition. The Calvinist Ruple admitted that “there was of course room for abuse in all this,” since “there is tyranny and oppression in every form of social existence in this fallen and ruined world.” However, in the small farmsteads where one or two slaves were on hand to work and serve, “the slave was as warmly clothed, as securely sheltered, and as bountifully fed as his master.” Later, James S. Brawley’s 1953 county history continued the viewpoint that emphasized the same moderation of tone and commonality. Brawley, a member of St. Luke’s, had very little to say about slavery at all.

Did the congregants of St. Luke’s hold such “mild and paternal” views? Did their actual behavior form the basis of Ruple’s conclusions? Given the evidence they formed the core of slaveholding in the county, they likely thought they did, and passed that idea on to the first local historian. Salisburyian Hope Summerell, who was a young girl at the time, remembered that “the hot and hasty sons of the planter aristocracy”—which often meant young men from St. Luke’s families—took no criticism of “the life they called the best.” One of the best windows available for furthering this interpretation can be observed in an 1833 visit to Salisbury by a professor at St. John’s College of Annapolis, who was fascinated by “this region of slaves” where elite men—he was referencing this after meeting Archibald Henderson and being “introduced to Major [John] Beard”—had long been “accustomed to being called master.” John W. Ellis, the Salisbury judge who was confirmed at St. Luke’s in 1858, then elected governor of North Carolina in 1859, put it plainly in an 1860 address. The “real issue” that led “free soilers, black Republicans, and Abolitionists” to push for Civil War was the “existence of slavery in our state,” hence the defense of it precluded other aspects of society and economy, at home, for him, and across the state.

Most local Episcopalians likely harbored such views, given that they read frequently the defense of slavery in their hometown newspapers. In 1857, for example, came a reprint from the *Augusta Chronicle*: “The real strength of slavery lies in its relative capacity of the two races, in the cheerful submission of the slave, in the dependence of the civilized world on its productions. . .” The coda also was revealing, as the system was undergirded “in the instinctive repugnance of the whites to the equality with blacks.”

How complex and ambivalent this attitude can be, yet so clearly the case, can be found in one of the few anecdotes we have of personal relationships that Rowan residents had with slaves. Episcopalian John B. Lord wrote to his sister in law, Mary Henderson, in 1843. Lord was in the mountains but needed to attend to business back home, thus:

*I send Mose home to attend to matters. I send by him the key to the desk [inside three other layers of drawers where lie the set of farm building keys]. Give Mose the keys of the crib and bacon and he will show you which they are. Ask Mr. H[enderson] . . . to weigh out meat for the Negroes: [by the pound] Amy 6, those at the house 8, Ann and Mary Jane 5, “for his [Mose?] Sarah 3.*

But like most keys, there was a string attached to its use. “Mose will attend to him as to me.”

This belief in a paternalistic and dominating system that was best for society was expressed across the diocese. The most prominent Episcopal layman of the day was the state Supreme Court Justice Thomas Ruffin, a vestryman at St. Matthews in Hillsborough. Among

the many essays that detailed his view of slavery was a speech given at the North Carolina State Fair in 1855, which was reprinted in a Salisbury newspaper. Ruffin argued forcibly that:

*The interest of the owner is not the only security to the slave for humane treatment [3] there is a stronger tie between them . . . they have a perfect knowledge of each other and a mutual attachment. . . Protection and provision [and here might be added, in retrospect, a referencing point of paternalism!] are the offices of the master and in return the slaves yield obedience. . . [Yes, he admitted] there are instances of cruel and devilish master AND [his emphasis] refractory slaves . . . These are exceptions and rare exceptions . . .*

Ruffin concluded with his view of blacks generally, that “we know that our slaves are generally humble, obedient, quiet, and a contented and cheerful race of laborers.” Such could have been a kind of primer for the attitudes that wealthy and powerful Episcopalians believed about themselves and the character of those beneath them in the social order of the day. They were to have a paternalistic—i.e., a controlling but in theory caring—relationship with their servants.

A second local example of this is to be found in the assumptions to be read into the business transactions of Archibald Henderson at the end of the Civil War. In 1865 Henderson maintained a patron/client relationship with some of the formerly enslaved. Simon Jefferson, a “colored freedman,” gained Henderson’s venture capital to start a new life. Henderson granted him a lot near the edge of the family plantation—roughly where Bringle Ferry Road starts out of the city—to build and start a blacksmith business. Jefferson owed \$40 once he had used timber on the plantation to build the shop and gain some traffic. He also had permission to build a house on the premises. Two months later, Henderson granted one of the first postbellum tenancy arrangements in Rowan County. Moses Archy and Samuel Steele were to rent Henderson land, with former slave houses “occupied rent free,” and cut wood that they needed while they raised crops in the spring of 1866. The three were each to receive a third of the harvest, with Henderson’s share to be delivered to his granaries first. A breaking of the lease required the freedmen to forfeit \$100.

Other local Episcopalians at various times exhibited paternalistic concern about the condition of the enslaved. As was the case with many prominent North Carolinians in the 1820s, Salisbury had a chapter of the American Colonization Society, an effort nationally to raise money enough to send some of the enslaved to Africa with their freedom restored. Archibald Henderson and James Martin, among others, were contributors to this effort. Episcopalians were known to take up black people’s rights in some situations. In 1831 Hamilton C. Jones defended “a certain Negro man slave Dennis” who had been permitted “to go to lease day and hire himself out unsupervised.” Dennis claimed that he had been told he could “go about at large hiring himself to divers persons . . . having hired his own time from his said masters.” The court found him guilty of deception, and ordered him leased in the normal way for a year. It is unclear who paid Jones, but he was interested enough in the case to file an appeal in 1832. In 1835 William Chambers brought suit against four Salisburyans, including the city tax clerk (and fellow Episcopalian) William Howard for assaulting his slave. The witnesses included Maxwell Chambers and Edward Yarborough.

Yet, local Episcopalian slaveholders could be as proprietary as they were paternalistic, especially when it came to treating their slaves as investments. In almost every slave holding life came the redistribution of property, like land or clothes, that involved the reallocation in space and time of human beings. Moreover, slaves in Rowan County—as elsewhere—were used as collateral for mortgages that involved everything from stock in gold mines to the redistribution of old farms.

Episcopalians, for all their elevated status and seeming security, often were in financial difficulties, and the potential worth to be derived from slaves proved to be more important than their individual dignity. In 1840, Mary and William Locke had to mortgage their holdings, including their inherited two-thirds interest in the Beard Bridge on the Yadkin and their half interest in Long's Ferry—both key sources of steady cash flow. As collateral they put up their “seven Negroes. . . Kit, Bet, Bob, Cyrus, Old Charles, Old Bet, and Old Ginny.” In debt in 1840, Hamilton C. Jones put up as collateral “two Negroes named Harrell about 18 and Winnifred about 13 years old.” If Jones did not pay, his creditor was to sell the two people to clear the debt. Such was the way that slaves were always disposable capital. William Locke still owed creditors in 1841 and put up “Bill, Little Bill, and Lucy,” possibly a whole family to cover an extension. Archibald Henderson had to secure debts on a large tract of land on Sills Creek west of Millbridge in 1842. He listed his 30 slaves, making them liable for sale in whole or partial divisions. Henderson owed more than \$15,000 to the local branch of the State Bank, payable in three years. Likely the bill was paid, since no record of slave sales exists.

The biggest contradiction to the standard of paternalism among local Episcopalians was their participation in leasing enslaved people. In this case, blacks were auctioned and sent somewhere else to work. The contract was only for a year, and although it was renewable, often the enslaved were shifted from place to place, and placed under new controls time after time. Leasing in Salisbury occurred on New Year's each year during the decades preceding the Civil War. It was a big day for Rowan slaveholders. One year it was listed that [Episcopalian] William “Howard . . . was the crier of the hiring of the Negroes.” During Christmas 1835 it was advertised in newspapers across the west: “Negroes! On the first day of January next to be hired at the courthouse.” During the first week of 1845 it was reported that “people came from far and near” with more than 250 “hires” made. Many were being sent to the region's gold mines. The next New Year's Day more than 100 were contracted for.

Key participants in leasing were the Archibald Hendersons, stalwarts of St. Luke's. As an example, Mrs. Susan Henderson worked on the matter in the absence of her husband in 1843:

*Mr. Hughes of Charlotte has taken Lydia and Lelisa for \$75. Anderson is left upon my hands—I offered him at \$100—Mr. Hughes wants him very much if he can make a satisfaction to take him . . . I have not received one cent for the hire of Lydia. I will have an empty purse until I get it.*

Some years as many as 50 at a time were sent off the family property. More than a dozen men hired Henderson slaves at some point or another, and the hirers included fellow Episcopalians Charles Fisher and John W. Ellis. In December 1860, Charles Fisher spent more than \$2,000 of North Carolina Railroad money on “Isaac Levi Julius Aleck Bill

Josephus Abett Mark Jack Dick Pomp Frank Tom Jake [and] Cornelius.” In all, the Hendersons took in \$4,000 from such rentals that year, a sum in excess of the standard value of the vast majority of farms in Rowan County.

Hiring could initiate a moral conflict, as shown in a letter to Mrs. Henderson from “your servant Isabelle,” written sometime during the Civil War, in a near perfect script and tone. “Please,” she asked her mistress, “not to hire me to Mrs. Cross next year.” Isabelle claimed that for the first time in 14 consecutive years of being hired out she had been physically abused, then was jailed for three days for “impudence.” “It is rather hard being hired out and never got in a stroke before and then to be beat by her.” To add to the complexity of the situation, Isabelle noted that the Hendersons would not have known ahead of time that this would have happened, and Isabelle herself had already found two other families that were willing to pay for her service the next year. Slaveholding could challenge its practitioners on the pious, personal, and proprietary levels, as local Episcopalians learned.

In essence, local Episcopalians demonstrated both paternalistic and pecuniary aspects in their approach to slavery. There were personal relationships but often they were superseded by the financial demands of the slave system as the basis for wealth of most Episcopal families. Given the mixed lot of master-slave relations, what kind of Christian perspective could be brought to bear about these relations between white parishioners and their slaves? Did churchliness make a difference in master and slave relationships?

### (3)

#### Slaves Among the Kneelers

That the complex social system called slavery practiced uncharitable behavior, but had paternalistic aspects, begs a question that scholars have wrestled with for more than a century. How could Christians—particularly the Protestants who dominated the South—behave in such a way? And, how many of them did so? A key aspect of this project is an inquiry into the religious ties that St. Luke’s members had with the people they enslaved. How strong were those ties, given the expectation that paternalistic masters should act upon the religious needs of their servants? I gauged this by measuring the extent to which those enslaved by local Episcopalians were involved in the congregational life of St. Luke’s, compared to other denominations and to other parishes within the North Carolina diocese.

Again, Judge Thomas Ruffin provides a proxy for a standard of behavior, at least on the idealistic level. Slaveowners, Ruffin argued, were expected to follow a standard where the

*. . . comfort, cheerfulness, and happiness of the slave should be and generally is, the study of the master; and every Christian man rejoices over the soul of his slave saved . . . The condition of a slave denies to him . . . education sufficient to searching the scriptures for himself and working there out his own conversion, but God forbid that that be necessary for salvation . . .*

Thus, Episcopalians in general, and we shall assume here, St. Luke's adherents in particular, were expected to make church itself a part of the life of their slaves, as an extension of their doctrines of faith. How well did this happen? And, how are we to judge it?

We can start with the architecture of the sanctuary. There is a parish tradition that a balcony was part of the original design. "There was a gallery across the east end over the door which fronted Main Street," according to an earlier effort to write a short history of the church. This document—most likely dating to the 1950s—would indicate that local Episcopalians in 1828 expected the enslaved to be part of congregational life. This was clearly the case elsewhere. For example, at the church in New Bern a gallery was added when whites filled the sanctuary and blacks had nowhere to sit or stand. The same was true when Christ Church in western Rowan in 1837 announced that "an ample gallery will be prepared for the use of the colored people."

But did the gallery become full? One St. Luke's family is clearly said to have practiced what Ruffin preached. A 1904 letter to St. Luke's rector Rev. F. J. Murdoch from Rev. C. W. Hayes shares the latter's reminiscences about his North Carolina youth in the 1840s. He remembered that the John B. Lords—"cousins of the Boydens"—had been "devoted church people in their plantation." This would indicate that the Lords were the exemplary local family in pursuing religious instruction and forbearance with slaves. What is most striking here is that he singles out only the Lords. A secondary reference is also illuminating. Hayes remembered that when he was at the Wilkesboro Church, he saw "families walking with their servants" to church, but he did not include what he called "these delightful old families" of St. Luke's in this second observation.

If correct Episcopal slaveholding presumed to have at least the house slaves walk to church with their masters, then wouldn't evidence of that show up in St. Luke's filling the balconies, like at nearby Christ Church? Black involvement in the life of a congregation is very measurable, through reports of communion, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. For example, Rowan Presbyterians in the antebellum age made strenuous efforts to have the people they enslaved be part of a church life. More than one-third of the members of the Third Creek congregation in the western part of the county were slaves, and on average about a fourth of the Salisbury church were black. These enslaved peoples were examined in the same strict way that whites were, received the same sacraments, and were subject to the same behavioral discipline.

St. Luke's, skeletal in size for the first fifteen years of its existence, does not provide enough data for any definitive type of conclusion. However, other parishes give us numbers that provide a bit of a context. In 1832, the parish in Fayetteville numbered 100 white and 23 black communicants. That year, there were 29 "colored" baptisms. In 1835 Wilmington had 134 white and 23 black members. The ratio in these two successful urban churches is about one colored member for each six or seven whites, which given the average of 22 members at St. Luke's for more than the span of a decade, would mean that St. Luke's would have had four blacks a year participating to be average. There is one datum to support this idea, in 1834, where we get the first actual mention of black participation. Rev. John Morgan reported that year 19 white and 5 colored communicants, with a marriage, a death, and two baptisms

involving the “colored” segment of the congregation. It is impossible to say if this level of interracial worship was the average for the rest of the 1830s, for often there is no parish report, and where there is, the report is “not encouraging . . . little or no appearance of better things.” Most importantly, the reports simply cannot help us from 1838 to 1845, for they are missing or meager.

Then, matters changed. The change coincided with the lifting of the national recession in 1843. In 1847, the journalist J. J. Bruner found the three town churches “pleasing to the eye”. He singled out the improvements evident at St. Luke’s, including the “material addition to its cupola which gives it an air of solemn majesty well becoming a house of worship.” This was evidence of growth and greater prosperity among members both in their personal gains and their giving. The average number of congregants, in the low twenties in the 1830s, grew to the high thirties during the 1840s. In fact, for reasons not explained in the church or community records, the membership goes from 26 in 1846 to 37 in 1848, corresponding to the improvements to the sanctuary. These new members included families with significant numbers of slaves, including those of Charles F. Fisher and John W. Ellis. The new composition went hand in hand with the advent of a growing body of new members, including the entry into Episcopacy of northern transplants. Notably, Nathaniel Boyden and Luke Blackmer were confirmed during the 1850s. The same time period also saw the emergence of the John and William Murphy families in the life of the congregation, and they—for whatever reason; none has been stated in any record—pushed the process of ministering to some of the enslaved, most likely, again, the house servants who lived with them in their town houses. The bishop, visiting the parish in 1857, noted the unusual condition that “the larger portion being men” who took communion.

At the same time, the church records show a greater absolute number of blacks, listed with phrases that suggest that whites had begun to live up to the paternalistic model that Ruffin and others prescribed. “Rachel, adult servant of J. C. McConnaughey” was baptized in May 1847. Soon after the Rev. J. H. Parker baptized “William, Henry, and Rebecca his wife,” servants of Dr. Pleasant Henderson. There were three colored baptisms in 1850.

However, as the named black participants grow in absolute number, the proportion of the congregation that was black dropped relatively. During the 1850s there was at best one black confirmand for every 30 white members. In contrast, Wilmington was at 10 per cent black, Fayetteville 10 per cent, Edenton and New Bern each 30 per cent. In fact, in 1853 St. Luke’s had the worst ratio of black membership to white membership in the whole diocese (based solely upon those parishes reporting that year).

There are only two traditional congregational stories about antebellum black communicants. Both of these would have been young people in the 1850s and part of that surge in membership and activities within the congregation. Both have been a part of congregational lore in previous work on parish history.

Hannibal R. Harrison is said to have been a youthful companion and possibly a servant of John S. Henderson. Harrison kept the faith long after emancipation, and became a servant of the Church. In 1882 he and another man were “ordained to the diaconate by the Episcopal

bishop” at a ceremony at St. Augustine College in Raleigh. These “two promising recruits to the ranks of the clerical alumni” joined eight other “colored clergy.” By 1884, Henderson had moved to Kentucky to become superintendent of a graded school in Lexington, but after that I could not locate him in any records.

The other was Lucinda Murphy. She is listed as a church member in 1875 and 1877. In 1900, “the old family nurse and mammy” came back to Salisbury for a final visit, to great fanfare, and genuinely expressed affection. She had been a slave in the John Murphy family, then was given to Susan Murphy, wife of William, who owned a farm south of the railroad. She was a house servant of the family’s children. “After freedom she remained with her mistress and never left the old home, attending to each member of the family, [even] robbing two young mistresses for their burial”. She was said to have served four generations. During the 1899 homecoming, she toured the old house and was well received at the church. She had been a “communicant of St. Luke’s,” Salisburyans learned, “devoted and regular in her attendance . . . [and had been] “respected by its entire congregation” until her move with a family member out of state.

(Historian William S. Powell, who in his 1953 bicentennial booklet wrote about Harrison, also listed Murphy, along with Elvia Connelly, as the other black woman in the congregation. I could not find Connelly in either the town or the church records.)

A growing absolute number of black congregants are part of the records after 1848. The diocesan report claims a colored baptism in 1855, and another in 1857. There is a note in 1858 listing a colored confirmation—this could, of course, have been Lucinda or Hannibal—when there was a class of 30 learning the catechism! The next year, a colored removal was listed but not named. The parish made no report to the diocese in 1860, but the local record shows something remarkable: “at the bishop’s visit” Margaret [“color’d”] was confirmed along with Hamilton C. Jones, Jr., Victoria Boyden, and Fanny Fisher. In March that year “a colored child son of \_\_\_\_\_ (Mr. Fisher’s) was buried in “the Lutheran cemetery”, perhaps the only black burial in the history of that white enclave.

The level of black participation in the local parish ironically grew during the Civil War. African-Americans began to have more of a presence within the parish. In 1861 Eliza Nesbit—the first slave to be given a last name in the records—was buried “near the English burying ground,” perhaps one of the first references to what would be called the Freedman’s Cemetery in later years. In 1862, there was a colored marriage; but, alas, the couple was not named. The same year the rector recorded two baptisms: “Sandy Frederick col’d infant belonging to James Murphy ‘in extremis’ and Eliza ‘in extremis.’” Three members in 1863 were identified in the diocesan report as being black. (These, of course, could have been Harrison, Murphy, and Connelly.) On June 14, 1863, William and Annie M. McNeely, heretofore not mentioned in the church records—though she was a McCay—had 18 of their “colored children” baptized together. Then a month later was recorded this burial: “Eliza (col’d infant) belongs to James Murphy in William Murphy’s private burial ground.” The same year there were three colored marriages reported to the diocese. Those couples were not named, but in April 1864, the rector reported to the council that Nelson Sprague was married to Chloe Shober. That summer the “col’d children” of Mrs. J. Chambers McConnaughey—

George, Dallas, Alfred, Alice Virginia, and William Harrison—were baptized. “Abram” and “Neely” were paid as sextons in 1862, then “Henry” in 1865. At the end of slavery, St. Luke’s finally caught up to the average for other town parishes in the diocese.

Several questions arise from these wartime records. Most importantly, how many of these were free people of color? Technically those in slavery could not marry, or were these simply evidence that the law was not being followed in such stressful times? I do not know, except that none of the people in the parish records show up among the free people of color in the 1860 census. Was this the rector’s doing, since it is interesting that he always says “reported to council,” perhaps an indication of dissent within the congregation? No other evidence exists either way for that analysis.

In all, more than thirty African Americans would be listed and/or named during the Civil War years, twice as many records for black involvement as had been the case in the first thirty years of the congregation’s history. This ironic twist on the character of a most uncivil war—one that lasted in terms of internal confrontations until the 1870s—seemed to have created, for a while at least, a civility within the sanctuary that made it more welcoming to all the victims of the strife and struggle that had engulfed Salisbury.

The sense of black people having a larger, at least metaphorical “balcony” in the sanctuary lasted into the Reconstruction years. We can be assured that when Henry B. Jones was married to Celia Kinder in August 1865, they were the first freed slaves to have their union consecrated. As late as 1869, the children of Nanny, “former slave of M. W. Jarvis,” were baptized. In 1871, Rosetta Lord had Sarah (10), Elizabeth (18), and Pleasant (8) baptized. All had been born into slavery. The transition to the postwar South can be exemplified by the “lapsed” status of Mary Sumner, “colored”, in 1872. (There is also the presence of a Charlotte Anson with her children, but I cannot find any record of her elsewhere.) Soon, again, blacks would have a minimal presence at St. Luke’s, a trend that was as much local as it was regional, as blacks migrated into their own congregations.

So, the story of black involvement in the life of St. Luke’s was one of relative inaction in the 1820s and 1830s on the part of the first generation of white members, then a growing sense of paternalistic involvement during the sectional conflict of the 1840s and 1850s. Compared however, to the efforts to evangelize among other denominations, and the vibrant role that blacks in some congregations in the diocese played, St. Luke’s record was slow to come to fruition and not until the Civil War was it approaching the normal expectation of the time; then the War caused its own set of changes.

#### (4)

### **Final Observations**

Race permeates the mantle of history in Rowan County. Racial prejudice has deeply influenced the character of county heritage. The presence of black people as the most prominent minority through three centuries has affected the habits, presumptions, and procedures followed by dominant whites. This report is but a narrow slice of a larger story of

both congregation and community. Broadly speaking, however, it helps clarify what has been neglected in the past by redirecting attention in the present. Here, it is hoped, is the elaboration of a more dichotic understanding of the diversity of voices that constitute a more humane concept of heritage. Consider it a small step with big intentions to help St. Luke's foster a more inclusive interpretation of the story of the telling of its history.

Knowing three key points about the role of slavery and slaveholding at St. Luke's—

- the centrality to both city and county as an economic and cultural force,
- the marginal presence in the pews and aisles in antebellum times,
- and the individual attempts at paternalism in the midst of penury—

can redirect the consciousness of all who benefit from the study undertaken. This essay suggests that knowledge of one's collective past spurs alterations that can broaden the hopes of the future, especially for a people of faith.

The three points, taken together, certainly belie Judge Ruffin's main contention in his famous 1857 address. Perhaps the people of St. Luke's did over time reconcile faith and action, taking to heart what Ruffin mistakenly admonished to be true: "that slavery in America has not only done more for the civilization and enjoyments of the African race than all other causes," it had opened the white race to better circumstances and attitudes than they had before. In one way and another most of Rowan County has implicitly lived within that false legacy until the present century. Perhaps knowing what we now know, that Ruffin and others made a fundamental error about the nature of the gospel, and of true belovedness, says as much about the whole nation as one small node within it. May both continue to change.

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