

The Life and Times of Jesse Harris

It was a warm summer morning in 1863 on a farm in Caldwell County. The air was thick and humid, like breathing liquid. It was the dog days of summer in rural North Carolina. There were times when a nice breeze would come across the mountains and into the valley making the summer just a little more bearable. But that was not the case today. Jesse had barely gotten a sip from his coffee when he heard the sound of horses outside his front door. He had reassured his pregnant wife and 7 children that this day would never come, even though he knew that was far from the truth. Ever since the new law was passed allowing men up to age 45 to be conscripted into the Confederacy, Jesse had experienced many sleepless nights. The men on the horses outside his door were wearing gray Confederate uniforms. There was no way to avoid the ugly truth now. Jesse was being conscripted into the Confederate Army. He put his cup down on the table and slowly opened the front door...

Anyway, that is how I imagine it! But what I do know for sure about my great-great grandfather is that he was indeed conscripted into the Confederate Army on August 20, 1863. He was 40 years old at the time[1], having been born in 1822 to parents Minyard Harris (1790-1881) and Fannie Moore (1794-1850). He married Phatima Eliza Corpening on March 30, 1848 (I do not have proof of this date). His oldest child, Jacob M. (Reverend) Harris (1851-1929) [2] was 12 at the time Jesse Columbus Harris went off to war. The other children were Jesse Filmore Harris (1854-1933), [3] Fanny Emma Harris (1855-1886), Sally Druscilla Harris (1857-1884), Emma Phatima Harris (1859-1930), J P McGruder Harris (1861-1909) and Nancy Lou Harris (1863-1938). Nancy was born September 12, 1863 which was just a few weeks after he joined the Confederacy. Jesse Harris had to leave behind a wife and 8 children (4 boys and 4 girls) as he joined the 26th Infantry Regiment of North Carolina.[4]

I found 2 land grants for Jesse Harris at the NC State Archives in Raleigh. The first one was issued in 1844 for 100 acres.[5] The second one was for 5 acres issued in 1846.[6] The 1850 Federal census shows he and his wife Phatima living with his father Minyard and his youngest sister Sarah Elmyra Harris.[7] The 1860 US Federal Census Slave Schedule lists the following slave ages and whether male or female for owner Jesse C Harris: Female age 62, female age 41, male age 33, female age 20, female age 10, male age 6, female age 2.[8] I wonder if the female slave age 62 is the one mentioned by the name of Catherine in his will, since she is to stay with his wife Phatima even if his wife remarries after he dies.

His forthcoming service as a private in Company F, 26th Regiment, North Carolina Infantry, Confederate Army was weighing heavily on his mind when the will was written. He even mentions Abraham Lincoln, "...and if Lincoln comes and sets the Negroes free or they get stolen or runaway...". Many scenarios were running through his head when he tried to imagine how his family might have been able to survive without him. He gave several instructions about "the negroes" and what to do if they get "contrary" or if his wife dies, and his sons can't see to them. [9] How difficult this time in his life must have been!

The first battle that Jesse Harris probably had to fight in was on September 20, 1863 at Chickamauga, Georgia. According to records from NARA, Jesse Harris was captured on October 14, 1863 at Bristow (also spelled Bristoe) Station, Virginia. This was less than 6 weeks after he was conscripted[10], and about a month after he wrote his last will and testament.[11] Jesse Harris was a Prisoner of War at Point Lookout, MD, which became the largest and one of the worst Union POW camps. Point Lookout became an established prisoner camp August 1, 1863. I can only hope that the horrible overcrowding and scarceness of food and fresh water reported at this camp came much later in his internment. He was released in a prisoner exchange on May 3rd, 1864. After that he and his Regiment fought many battles in Virginia, including 3 days at Cold Harbor, June 1-3, 1864. After that bloody and lopsided battle where thousands of Union soldiers were killed, the 26th Regiment fought mostly in and around Petersburg, Virginia. His career as a soldier ended when he mustered out on March 12, 1865 at a hospital in Petersburg, Virginia. He died of disease that day.[12]

I imagine that many hopes and dreams died that day along with my great-great grandfather. His hope was that his children would get a good education, and I believe that was the case. According to several Federal Census records, all of his children were able to read and most of them could write. His daughter Emma Phatima Harris married Julius Pinkney Smith (according to the 1900 Federal Census they were married in 1885).[13] Their oldest child (of 8 living children), James Arthur Smith, was my maternal grandfather.

The story of my great-great grandfather is a sad but nonetheless interesting one. It must have been extremely hard to be forced into a position of defending the only way of life you knew; yet knowing that it was probably coming to an end. The end of the Civil War was just a few short weeks away when he died. Although I don't know what kind of person he was, I do know that in my family there were and are lots of ordinary hard working folks. I am very proud to tell about this branch of my family, and I hope to continue to gather more information in the future about them.

[1] Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of North Carolina, Publication Number M270, Catalog ID: 586957, Record Group 109, The National Archives

[2] North Carolina Death Certificates, Microfilm S.123. Rolls 19-242, 280, 313-682, 1040-1297. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina

[3] North Carolina Death Certificates, Microfilm S.123

[4] Record Group 109, National Archives

[5] Land Grant File No. 102, Jesse Harris, Entry No. 263, Book No. 149, Page No. 504, Office of the Secretary of State of North Carolina, North Carolina Department of Archives and History.

- [6] Land Grant File No. 165, Jesse Harris, Entry No. 455, Book No. 151, Page No. 323, Office of the Secretary of State of North Carolina
 - [7] Seventh Census of the United States, 1850 (National Archives Microfilm Publication. Census Place: Johns River, Caldwell, North Carolina; Roll: M432_623; Page: 3A; Image: 11.)
 - [8] 1860 US Federal Census Slave Schedules
 - [9] Will of Jesse C. Harris 1863 (WB-A/171), NC State Archives
 - [10] National Archives Records, Record Group 109
 - [11] Will of Jesse Harris
 - [12] National Archives Records, Record Group 109
 - [13] 1900 US Federal Census
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 **Description:** Jesse Harris, Civil War