THE THREE WISE MEN OF

AVERY COUNTY, N.C.

Beautiful little Avery County has the distinction of being the home of the only 3 brothers who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, survived the Battle of Gettysburg, and lived long enough to attend the Gettysburg battle reunion in 1913.[[1]](#footnote-1) They were all sons of **JOSIAH WISE** (1800-1848) and **MARGARET ‘PEGGY’ DAVIS,[[2]](#footnote-2)** (1803-1868) who, through the course of their lives, lived in an area of Burke County that later became Yancey County—the county borders simply changed. In 1831 Josiah was appointed as justice for the County Court of Pleas[[3]](#footnote-3); 7 years later, he was appointed Yancey County commissioner.[[4]](#footnote-4) They had 10 children together:

\*RACHEL (*DELLINGER*) (1828-1910)

\*BENJAMIN (1829-1860)

\*SARAH ‘ANNA’ (*SHOOK*) (1832-1898)

\*FRANCIS ‘FRANKIE’ (*CLARK*) (1834-1880)

\*SUSANNA LUCINDA (*CLARK)* (1836-1898)

\***JOHN** (1838-1931)

\*ELIZABETH ‘ELIZA’ (*MACE*) (1840-1889)

\*JAMES MARION (1842-1915)

\***THOMAS JASPER** (1844-1933)

\***JOSIAH NEWTON ‘NEWT’** (1845-1924)

When Josiah died in 1848, his children ranged in age from 3 to 18 years old; his widow Peggy remarried sometime between 1850 and 1860 to James Burleson, but apparently was again a widow by the time of the 1860 census.[[5]](#footnote-5)

On May 3, 1861, John Wise enlisted as a private in Capt. Zeb Vance's Rough & Ready Guards of the 14th Inf Reg;[[6]](#footnote-6) he must have been very motivated, as sentiment in the mountains was divided about the war, and this was *2 weeks before* North Carolina had officially seceded from the Union![[7]](#footnote-7) Just a couple of months later, on June 24, 1861, Thomas enlisted in Company E, 6th N.C. Inf.[[8]](#footnote-8) Newt had to wait until almost the end of the war to come of age in order to join as well, enlisting on March 16, 1864: He was mustered into the same company as Thomas.[[9]](#footnote-9) Their remaining brother, James Marion, probably would have joined as well, but while he was of the appropriate age, he had been bitten by a snake and left ‘scally’ for the rest of his life.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The NC 6th Regiment is described as follows:

*“6th Infantry Regiment State Troops was organized at Camp Alamance, near Company Shops (Burlington), North Carolina, in May, 1861. The men were from the counties of Mecklenburg, Orange, Burke, Catawba, McDowell, Mitchell, Yancey, Alamance, Rowan, Wake, Caswell, and Chatham. Ordered to Virginia the unit fought under General B. E. Bee, then spent the summer and winter in the Dumfries area. Its brigadiers during the conflict were Generals Whiting, Law, Hoke, Godwin, and W. G. Lewis. The 6th was prominent in the campaigns of the army from*[*Seven Pines*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va014)*to*[*Mine Run*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va044)*, then was active in the battles of*[*Plymouth*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=nc012)*and*[*Cold Harbor*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va062)*. It fought with Early in the Shenandoah Valley and later in the Appomattox operations.*

*This regiment reported 23 killed and 50 wounded at*[*First Manassas*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va005)*, and in April, 1862, contained 715 effectives. It lost 115 during the Seven Days' Battles, 147 at*[*Second Manassas*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va026)*and Ox Hill, 125 in the Maryland Campaign, and 25 at*[*Fredericksburg*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=va028)*. Of the 509 engaged at*[*Gettysburg*](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=pa002)*, thirty-six percent were disabled. At the Rappahannock River in November, 1863, it lost 5 killed, 15 wounded, and 317 missing, and there were 6 killed and 29 wounded at Plymouth. It surrendered with 6 officers and 175 men of which 72 were armed.*

*The field officers were Colonels Isaac E. Avery, Charles F. Fisher, William D. Pender, and Robert F. Webb; Lieutenant Colonels William T. Dortch, Charles E. Lightfoot, and Samuel M. Tate; and Major Richard W. York.”[[11]](#footnote-11)*

There was a heart-warming story concerning Tom and Newt, just as the war was winding down:

*“Tom and Newton lost sight of each other in March 1865, and Tom supposed that his brother had been killed, but he kept on fighting. On the 6th of April he was shot through the wrist, a very bad wound that to this day* [i.e. 1911] *has not healed, and after desperate hand-to-hand fighting was taken prisoner. After the surrender of Lee at Appomattox courthouse April 9th, Tom started through the federal hospital to see who he could find that he knew and to his great surprise and joy, discovered his* [little] *brother Newton. They remained together until they were able to travel, when they made their way back home to the mountains, a large part of the distance* [some 240 miles in total] *on foot.”[[12]](#footnote-12)*

All three brothers survived the war and lived long full lives in their beloved

mountain home, each one raising a large family. The only time they came out of the mountains was for a war reunion, and the highlight of those meetings was the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, which was held on July 1-4th 1913.

The inspiration for the reunion came from a Union general in 1908:

*“In April 1908, General H. S. Huidekoper, a Philadelphia native who lost his right arm at Gettysburg in 1863, suggested a fitting semicentennial observance of the three-day battle to Pennsylvania Governor Edwin S. Stuart.*

*Stuart, who presented the idea to the state’s General Assembly in January 1909 and established the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg Commission later that year, envisioned a reunion of Union and Confederate soldiers that would be talked about for years to come. “Other States, both north and south, whose sons fought at Gettysburg, will surely co-operate in making the occasion one that will stand foremost in the martial history of the world,” he said.”[[13]](#footnote-13)*

![A close up of a newspaper

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The ad to the right was likely the route and the days they used to travel, and it was certainly a note-worthy and healing event after the most divisive time in United States history. There were well over 100,000 people in attendance, some 58,000 of them being veterans from both sides of the conflict.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, NC, 22 June 1913.

John, Tom, and Newt Wise were true mountain men and here is yet another story of their escapades:

*“While in Avery county on our way to Crossnore, we met John Wise, now aged 90, the man who held a huge grizzly bear by his hind legs for 30 minutes while his brothers Newton and Thomas Wise, aged 80 and 83 respectively, went home to get the gun to kill him with. All of them are ‘sprightly gentlemen’ and time sits lightly on their shoulders…”[[15]](#footnote-15)*

Newt died in 1924; John in 1931, and Tom lived until 1933. Never lacking for yet another good story, the following was a legend surrounding Newt:

*“REAL JESSE JAMES WAS PAL OF NEWLAND MAN’S FATHER, PAPER CLAIMS: That Jesse James, notorious bandit and outlaw of the ‘bad old, glad old’ West was not shot down by Robert Ford his cousin as history claims, but died last July at the age of 84 years, is argued in an article written by Alvin S. Orton and published recently in the Pueblo Star Journal, Pueblo, Colo.*

*The article also claims that the real Jesse James lived under the name of Jim Shears for 40 years and worked with Newton Wise, father of T.C. Wise of Avery county, in western mining camps for seven or eight years. It was Tom Howard, one of the notorious James band who was killed by Ford and not the leader himself, according to Orton’s claims. His article is based on a death bed confession Shears is said to have made to his close friend, Bill White, of Florence, Colo. shortly before he died. According to Orton’s account, Shears told White that he was the real Jesse James and for 40 years he had lived as Jim Shears.*

*A clipping of the article was sent to Mr. Wise by his sister who lives in Salida, Colo. near where the elderly Mr. Wise is said to have worked with Shears.*

*Shears is said to have been a logger. In his death bed confession, he is said to have told White that Howard died of typhoid fever and afterward was shot in the back to throw ‘officers and others off Jesse’s scent.’*

*The whole story of how Ford killed James in a cabin is in error according to the statement published. Shears told White Orton wrote that he chose the name of Shears because it was that of his mother.”[[16]](#footnote-16)*

Such were the controversies that surrounded Jesse James and his gang, that immediately rumors were circulated as to the events surrounding his murder, identity, and place of burial. They have been perpetuated ever since, and finally resulted in a 1995 exhumation of his supposed remains in Kearney, Missouri, were subjected to rigorous DNA and archaeological analysis. The results were as follows:

*“Preliminary DNA tests show remains exhumed from Jesse James’ grave probably are his, a forensic scientist said Friday. The grave in Kearney, Mo., was exhumed in July to resolve lingering doubts about whether the outlaw’s body had really been buried there.*

*James Starrs, the George Washington University scientist who led the exhumation, said just about everything historians had believed about James was confirmed by the genetic tests. That included proof that the James family line extended from his mother, Zerelda James, to living descendants who gave their blood for analysis.*

*“We’ve been very fortunate in light of the degraded condition of the remains,” Starrs said at the James Younger Gang 1995 Kentucky Roots Conference. Starr said a complete report will be released Feb. 23 in Nashville at a meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. Preliminary findings also showed that James:*

*Was 5-foot-8 to 5-foot-10 inches tall.*

*Was buried in a pine box with ash handles, not in a metal*

*coffin as reported by newspapers in 1882.*

*Had two bullet wounds - one on the lower right side of the*

*back of his head and another in the right ribs.”[[17]](#footnote-17)*

So ample research has been done with the advantages of modern technology to put to rest yet another legend surrounding Jesse James, and in this case, involving Newt Wise, who was the first of the 3 brothers to die.

John Wise’s obituary reads as follows:

*“NOTED BEAR HUNTER DIED SATURDAY NIGHT IN HIS 98TH YEAR…large landowner and outstanding citizen of the Three Mile section, was Avery county’s oldest citizen being one of the few survivors of the famous battle of Gettysburg. Until a few days ago, when he fell and injured himself… He was more than six feet tall and was famous throughout this section as the man who held a bear. In young manhood while out hunting, he captured a large bear and held it single-handedly while a comrade ran more than a half mile to bring a gun. This and many other experiences of pioneer days make up a colorful history for the deceased.”[[18]](#footnote-18)*

Tom was the last to die, and all 3 are buried in the Pisgah United Methodist church cemetery, located in Altamont, Avery County, N.C.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A person wearing a hat and glasses

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***DANIEL E. JOHNSON IV*** is the 3rd-great-grandnephew of the Wise brothers, and an Assemblies of God missionary in Spain.



The Charlotte Observer,

30 July 1911, p 24



The News & Observer,

Raleigh, NC, 18 Nov 1923, p 37

1. Asheville Citizen-Times (Asheville, North Carolina) · 27 Aug 1933, Sun · p 28: *“These three brothers acquired national fame at the Gettysburg battlefield reunion in 1913. They were the only three brothers of either North or South who had gone through the war, including the battle of Gettysburg, and survived to attend the reunion as veterans of the Confederate army.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # [North Carolina, Wills and Probate Records, 1665-1998](https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=9061)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Burke: The History of a North Carolina County, 1777-1922: A Glimpse Beyond, Revised Edition by [William Phifer](https://www.amazon.com/-/es/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&field-author=William+Phifer&text=William+Phifer&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Toe River Valley Heritage vol III [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1860 Watauga co., NC census, Mountain Home district, dwelling 383, family 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. NC Troops 1861-1865: A Roster [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [**http://www.nccivilwar150.com/history/secession.htm**](http://www.nccivilwar150.com/history/secession.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *North Carolina Troops-A Roster 1861-1865,*Division of Archives and History, NC Department of Cultural Resources. Vol. 4, pg. 305-317 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Anthology of Death,* by Jake Carpenter*: "...marked after a snake. He'd get scally during dog days. I've passed through their yeard and seen him lying flat on his belly panting with tongue out. Name Marion.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [**https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=CNC0006RI**](https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=CNC0006RI) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Charlotte Observer (Charlotte, North Carolina) · 30 Jul 1911, Sun · p 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [**https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/28128/gettysburg-great-reunion-1913**](https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/28128/gettysburg-great-reunion-1913) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, NC, 26 August 1923, p 6. The veracity of this account is questionable, starting with grizzly bears not being native to North Carolina. The penchant for embellishment seems apparent in this brief article, but nevertheless, it becomes possibly credible if the bear was indeed a much smaller, well-known native black bear. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Asheville Citizen-Times (Asheville, North Carolina) · 20 Dec 1931, Sun · p 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. https://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/sep/24/grave-bearing-jesse-james-name-is-his [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Asheville Citizen-Times (Asheville, North Carolina) · 17 Mar 1931, Tue · p 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/33782351/john-wise [↑](#footnote-ref-19)