

Some Recollections of the Late Wright Cherry and  
His Beloved Wife Malinda Gilliam Cherry of Bertie County, North Carolina  
By Maria Cherry Newsome, 1956

*The attached pages are copied from a notebook written by Maria Cherry Newsome in 1956 (date found written in the notebook and on a bank deposit slip which had been placed inside).*

*Dr. Harold E. Mitchell and Walter R. Craig, nephews of John Whid and Maria Cherry Newsome, found the notebook during the spring of 2004 as they were cleaning the family cemetery on the farm. The notebook was in the brush among items of trash and about 800 feet from the farmhouse. We speculate that vagrants had removed the notebook with other items outside the house in search of valuables.*

*Maria was 74 years old in 1956. A retired schoolteacher and grandmother of 14 children, she was heard to mention many times some of the information she recorded in this notebook. Her message is similar to that which her siblings had also related on many occasions.*

*A strong faith, family pride, deeply instilled values and appreciation for the sacrifices of our ancestors are evident in Maria's notebook. These are some of the qualities which governed the lives of her generation and which sustain our enduring bond.*

*Through adversity and struggle, Wright and Malinda Cherry imparted to their offspring models of courage, integrity, ambition and desire to serve and promote the betterment of the communities where they lived. They built a legacy for which we are profoundly grateful.*

The late Wright Cherry was born in Bertie County near the Holly Grove Baptist Church about 12 miles from Windsor going north, on Highway Number \_\_\_ on a large plantation. This plantation consisted of more than 1000 acres. He was not sure of the date he was born. He always said in January 1839.

From this date we see that he served his master as a slave for 26 years.

As a child, he lived around the Great House (the name given the house in which the Mistress and Master lived). His mother, Judy Outlaw, was the house servant and lived in a small one-room house in the back of the yard so as to serve her Mistress and her family. His mother had a family of five, two boys and three girls, as follows: Wright, Madison, Harriet, Caroline, and Sarah. The father was unknown. What usually happened, the master of the plantation was King of the plantation and no laws to prevent it, no criticism, so long as the servant was humble and obedient to him.

As stated by Wright Cherry, the children had no clothing, save one long shirt that would cover the body, no shoes until one was large enough to work, and no bed except a few shucks on the floor covered with rags.

When it was winter, his job was to catch birds help feed the family. When the ground was covered with snow, he would dig a path and gather birds all day. His feet became frostbitten which followed him through life. As his mother was the cook at the great house, she would bring a few scraps of food to help out. One was not allowed a certain amount of food until he could fill his place and a hand on the farm, then he was allowed 4 pounds of meat and a peck of meal. The change of clothing was made by night by the use of the loom and spinning wheel. The slaves picked the seed from the cotton

which was carded and spun by hand and then woven on the loom. Two such suits or dresses would have to last a year. The shoes were made from the hides of beasts, the tacks were handmade. In fact this plantation was a little world within itself.

Having been reared in the Great House was a great honor in those days and the slaves that felt themselves superior to the ones that lived down on the farm.

There was a hut for each family and usually a dozen or more on the plantation according to the number of slaves.

The house servant and their children served the master, his wife and their children. They did not have to do the tasks on the farm, nor walk in mud to their knees in the ditch, burn brush, take up stumps, or plow. So Wright became a dependable hand around the home. He was allowed to play with the white boys when not on duty and from them he learned to read and write which was strictly against law. One was whipped severely if a book was caught in the house.

When the white boys came from school, he could go in the yard to play, and out there he played on the sand and with his fingers making letters and figures until he could read and write as well as they. When he became a young man, he was made an overseer around the plantation. It was common to have the slaves brought up on the yard at evening, tied to the whipping post, his shirt tied around his waist, and 9 and 30 lashes put on his naked back, and then salty brine poured on top of that.

When one had taken all he felt he could stand, they sometimes ran away and sought refuge in the swamp. After a few days absence, a group would go out, take a musical instrument and play. They usually would come back and then get another lashing. He saw a taskmaster whip a woman so severely they would sometimes die from failure to do their task.

However, in the course of time, the war broke out between the North and the South. His master and father had to go and all of the boys that was eligible. His master served as Colonel in the Army. With perfect confidence in Wright, he was left in charge of the home and plantation and he proved himself worthy of the responsibility laid upon him.

One morning, he arose early. He began to think, "I have served as a slave long enough." I want to be a free man. I want my mother to be free. I want to help free my people, therefore, I will not be a slave any longer, and quote, "Live or die, Sink or swim, I'll try.

So instead of taking his master's horse to drive over the plantation and set the slaves at work, he turned him down the road and drove 25 miles until he came to Chowan River, there he took the bridle off the horse so as to be able to graze for his living, took off his clothes, tied onto his back, swim across the river and walked three days and nights

without food save the buds of trees and sometimes a bit of bread that he found at the house of a slave.

On the third day, he reached the Yankees and on finding he could read and write he was soon promoted to the rank of Sergeant. He served in the Army two years and helped to win freedom for his people and with an honorable discharge he returned home back to his master. They took off their hats to him and sold him 200 acres of land for \$200, the money he saved in the Army, built-in a log cabin, married the late Linda Gilliam, an honorable slave from the Mitchell plantation and landlord.

At this time, he was 32 years old. To their union was born 13 children, four boys and nine girls.

Wright became a leader in his community and was instrumental in building a church known as Piney Woods Chapel and built a school known as the Cherry School. He served as a school committeeman for 40 years. He also served in his County as a County Commissioner and Magistrate and had the honor of representing his County in the legislature but would not accept for fear he would not be able to do justice to his family's education.

#### My Last Request and Testimony

My Dear Children,

I have given my life that you may have a better chance than I had in this world. I cannot die satisfied without the hope that each of you has accepted the religious principles of Jesus Christ.

It is my last request that you join hands and pledge by the help of God that you stand by and help each other whenever you can, that the principles of Jesus Christ rule in your heart such as love, joy, peace, knowledge, understanding rests with you forever, that you work together as one big family, that you put forth every effort possible to see that no one is lost, that what we have "the home" as a family shrine and that you work together to develop it, upkeep, and development of the treasured spot. That each will have a home here his lifetime and the children that come after that you remember our forefathers and the sacrifices that has been made for you to be here, that you put forth an effort unless Providence hinders, meet at least once a year and consider these things.