

On the Trail of Fannie James in North Carolina

Fannie James has become an iconic figure in Lake Worth Beach history. With her husband, Samuel, she moved to the western shore of Lake Worth in 1885 and founded the pre-Lake Worth community of Jewell. The couple's mixed-race background did not hinder their success, even as post-Civil War segregation laws were settling over much of northern and central Florida. Fannie and Samuel were the social and financial leaders of Jewell, serving that small community of farmers in so many ways. As a skilled carpenter, Samuel built numerous homes and docks for their neighbors. Fannie served as the first postmistress, nurse, pineapple grower, cook on the steamboat, as well as neighbor and friend. The Jameses homesteaded two parcels, bought two others, subdivided them, and sold off plots for healthy profits. Their holdings totaled over 600 acres, making them the largest landowners in the area. Their many talents and successes were documented in the book *Pioneers of Jewell* (2013) and previous articles in the *Lake Worth Herald*. Yet there are many gaps in her personal history and continuously growing questions about her family and background. We are continuing our research, hoping to tell more of their story.

In 2021, my wife, Chris, and I stopped in Washington Court House, Ohio to further our research into Fannie's background, her family, and her times. We discovered an abolitionist stronghold that became a refuge for many people of color, including Fannie James' family during the Civil War. See "On the Trail of Fannie James," *Lake Worth Herald*, October 14, 2021.

This summer, we decided to visit Fannie's birthplace in North Carolina to see what further background and history we could uncover. Our stops included Yanceyville and Milton in Caswell County, Roxboro in Person County and Oxford in Granville County, where we met fellow research historian Scott McCabe.

Scott is a former Palm Beach Post reporter who had written a series of groundbreaking articles about the Jameses in 1999. However, at that time, online records were not yet available. Unknowns included the location of the original Jewell Post Office and James Homestead, the identities of other Jewell residents, and the background of the Jameses before arriving on the west shore of the Lake in 1885. Despite having moved out of state, Scott has maintained a keen interest in Lake Worth history, and we continue to collaborate, doing online research on Ancestry.com, old newspapers, etc. At Oxford, the two of us had a great time rummaging through old records and announcing our discoveries to each other.

We strained our eyes to read the scrawling longhand of old marriage, tax, land ownership and other documents in County Court Houses, local historical societies, and libraries. Mark Pace at the Oxford Public Library was an outstanding resource who oversaw an extensive local history collection and had terrific knowledge of online records.

First stop: Milton, North Carolina, a small, affluent town in Caswell County on the Virginia state line. According to the 1840 census, Fannie's parents, Henry and Lucy Jones (nee Mangum) had lived in the area. The Henry James household is listed with one adult black male (Henry), one white female (undoubtedly Lucy), and 5 young black girls (probably including Fannie's older sisters), as well as three other black adults (probably farmhands).

Main Street in Milton is still lined with dozens of beautiful, well-maintained antebellum homes. We were surprised to learn that during the early 1800s, the town was home to many free “people of color,” including a famous cabinet maker, Thomas Day. The area was a tobacco-growing hub. Large plantations surrounded the town. An extraordinary number of enslaved blacks labored in tobacco fields, which provided the region with its primary source of wealth.

A big surprise came when we discovered Fannie’s parents’ marriage license from 1822. Her father, Henry Jones, was a free black who owned property. Her mother, Lucy Mangum, was Irish. It was thought unusual, to say the least, for a mixed-race couple to be legally married in that time and place. As we dug further, we learned that there were ups and downs in the rights and freedoms that African Americans experienced in pre-Civil War North Carolina. Mixed marriages were not as uncommon as we had thought.

After the American Revolution, there was a sincere belief on the part of some slave owners in the declaration that “All men are created equal.” Quakers and some Baptists, Methodists and others were active in the North Carolina Manumission Society that sought to free enslaved people. Some voluntarily freed their slaves. Others emancipated them in their wills.

For “free people of color” in North Carolina in the early 1800s, there was a measure of freedom that many of us today may find surprising. They could operate businesses serving both black and white customers. They could even sell liquor and own hunting rifles. Then, in 1831, the Nat Turner Slave Rebellion put whites on edge and these freedoms were gradually eroded by county and state legislation. We learned that interracial marriage was not legally prohibited until the 1830s. Due to public pressure, the Manumission Society ceased to function by 1834. Remnants of its membership became “depots on the Underground Railroad.”

Nevertheless, the counties where Fannie James’ family lived, namely Caswell, Persons and Granville Counties, had a sizeable free black population who retained rights to own property, file legal complaints and testify in court, operate businesses, and often were able to ignore discriminatory laws right up until the Civil War. According to statistics reported in the book new *Unruly Women* by Victoria Bynum, about 10% of the population of Granville County consisted of free people of color, while 40% of the population was enslaved in 1860.

Piecing the picture together from various census reports, property, and marriage records, we can derive the following list of Fannie’s immediate family.

Father, Henry (Henrey) Jones born around 1785.
Mother, Lucy Mangum (Mangrum) born around 1805.
Sister, Polly Jones born around 1825.
Sister, Nancy Jones born around 1827.
Sister, Elizabeth (Betsey) Jones born around 1831.
Sister, Emily Jones born around 1836.
Sister, Eliza Jones born around 1838.
Fannie (probably Frances) Jones born around 1840.
Sister, Lucy Jones probably born before 1850.

As we poured through records over 150 years old, we discovered some significant details about Fannie’s family.

Fannie's parents married in Persons County in 1822. They lived in Halifax County, Virginia, in 1830 and Caswell County, North Carolina, in 1840. Fannie's father apparently died around 1849, leaving the family in financially sore straights. Shortly thereafter, Fannie's mother moved to nearby Oxford, NC, in Granville County. The 1850 census shows her living on the poor side of town. The home was located between the orphanage/poorhouse on the one side and the household of an "unruly woman" named Nancy Anderson on the other.

We were able to identify and visit the homesite with the help of county records that gave the exact location of the now-demolished poorhouse. The area is currently a large open field near a tobacco research lab on the edge of town.

Neighbor Nancy Anderson was trouble. Her misadventures are reported in the book *Unruly Women*. She had been arrested for thievery as well as assault and battery on several occasions. Her household consisted of 6 young women, some younger children and two older, unrelated men. It has been suggested that the household may have actually been a brothel with the men serving as "bouncers."

Lucy's new home in Oxford must have been quite crowded. The census shows her living with her three older daughters, Polly, Betsy, and Emily, and sharing the house with another white mother with 2 mulatto kids, another sign of her depressed financial condition. We were disappointed that the younger daughters, Fannie and Lucy, are not mentioned. Their whereabouts in those years was a mystery that we were determined to solve if at all possible.

A tantalizing clue appeared as we examined old court records. An ongoing series of disputes between Lucy's family and the Nancy Anderson household landed in court on at least four occasions. In 1851, Nancy Anderson was charged with petty larceny, apparently for stealing a horse. A dozen neighbors testified against her, including Fannie's mother, Lucy. But, the tension between the two households did not end there. In 1854, Lucy and her children were attacked when, according to court records, a gang of 9 people associated with Nancy Anderson entered and literally dismantled their house. In the melee, Lucy's daughters, Polly and Emily were assaulted with sticks and rocks along with "Frankie Anderson," who may have been Fannie. (See below.) The feud continued with ongoing assault charges over the next couple of years. By 1860, Lucy was able to move to a nicer part of town, living next door to her daughter Eliza.

Even after their move to Granville County, the family maintained roots in Milton, Caswell County. Fannie's sister, Nancy, continued to live in Milton. She purchased a small lot there in 1844, followed by a half dozen other real estate investments over the next 50 years. The 1860 census shows her with six children, three boys and three girls. Mysteriously, Nancy and her children inherited land, including a valuable lot on Main Street from Martha Stewart, of a prominent white family. The land sold for \$2,000 in 1883, equivalent to about \$400,000 in today's real estate market. We have been unable to discover the connection between the Jones and Stewart families or the motive for gifting such valuable property.

Nancy married William P. Webster in Milton in 1878. The couple continued to buy and sell real estate. One transaction that reflects the couple's generosity was their gift of an acre of land to the Board of Education for the Dry Fork Colored Public School. William died sometime between 1907 and 1909. Nancy then moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, to be near her oldest son, W.T.B. Jones. Her grandson, A. T. B. Jones, served as co-executor of Fannie James' estate in 1915 and made several

trips to Lake Worth, Florida, in the course of these duties. Nancy was named as a beneficiary and received a third of Fannie's estate. Nancy died in Knoxville in 1919.

In our research, we found, at times, that information from documented sources can be unreliable. Particularly, peoples' ages, as recorded on the US Census and other official documents, don't always line up. This is clearly the case with Fannie's older sister, Nancy. The following sources give ages at various points in her life that yield a wide range of dates for her birth:

- 1850 US Census - 1825.
- 1860 US Census – 1829.
- 1878 Marriage - 1838.
- 1880 US Census - 1832.
- 1900 US Census - 1840.

These discrepancies range from 1825 to 1840, a wide spread of 15 years. Census takers must have introduced inaccuracies in the record as they rushed from home to home. Nancy's marriage license is most puzzling, since it would be expected that she was the source of the information. Given that her husband-to-be was quite a bit younger, it is possible that, like many marriageable women, she understated her age. If this were the case, it may also be possible that her younger sisters, Fannie and Lucy, also understated their ages which would resolve a number of anomalies, as we shall see.

Fannie's sister, Betsey (Elizabeth) Jones, married William A. Anderson in Milton in 1853. Betsey and William had four children, including Alonzo Anderson visited Aunt Fannie in Florida and made numerous trips on the train to Lake Worth when he served as co-executor of her estate.

The Andersons were a large family of land-owning free blacks living in Oxford. It was a small and tight community where intermarriage was common. There were three marriages between the Anderson and Jones families in short order. Margaret-Ann Jones and Jerry Jones married in Oxford in December 1852. Betsey and William's union was marked by a double wedding as Frances Jones and Nelson Anderson were married on the same date in Milton on January 18, 1853. It appears likely that our Fannie James was the listed Frances Jones. (Further details below.)

We were delighted to find Eliza Jones in the 1859 county property tax records owning 10.5 acres. There were two houses on the property. Eliza lived in one with two young children, Emma and Will, while her mother lived in the other with daughters, Polly and Ann. We had known about Polly from numerous other records, but our research did not previously find a daughter named Ann.

Fannie Jones, as a child, daughter of Henry and Lucy Jones, does not appear anywhere in the US Census records. Most curiously, while her older sisters, Polly, Emily, Eliza, and Betsey, are shown living with their mother at various times, Fannie and younger sister Lucy (Jr.) are strikingly missing. However, another curious clue appears in the marriage records of Caswell County. Frances A. Jones and Nelson S. Anderson were married in a double wedding with Fannie's sister Betsey Jones and William A. Anderson on January 18, 1853. Could this Frances be Fannie? Is it possible that Frances, Frankie, Ann, and Fannie are all the same person?

It is not hard to imagine Fannie as a nickname for Frances. The difficulty comes in with Fannie's age. If the ages given on her death certificate and in the US Census are correct, Fannie was born in

1843, meaning she would have been nine years old at the time of the Jones-Anderson weddings. This seems highly unlikely. However, the 1885 Florida Census points toward a birthdate for Fannie in 1840, meaning that Fannie would have been twelve. Marriage at puberty was not unusual in 1850s North Carolina. Given the age inaccuracies that we have documented relating to her sister, Nancy, moving Frances / Fannie Jones's birthdate to 1840 or even earlier is a reasonable way to make sense of this fuzzy data.

In any **case**, Fannie can be identified in official records with complete confidence for the first time in 1868. At that time, Fannie's sister Betsey applied for widow's benefits as her husband, William A. Anderson, had died as a Union soldier during the Civil War. Fannie signed an affidavit on her behalf stating that she and William were indeed man and wife and that Fannie was "*in the room*" when her sister Betsey was married. If Fannie married Nelson Anderson at the same time, it would help explain her being called Frankie Anderson when she and her sisters, Polly and Emily were assaulted. Why would an unrelated "Frankie Anderson" have been present or involved in that affair?

Another hole in Fannie's background might also be filled if we understand Frances Anderson and Fannie James as the same person. To explain, around 1862, a large contingent of 25 Anderson relatives migrated from Granville County, North Carolina, to the Washington Court House area. In 1863, the State of Ohio compiled a list of the new "black" immigrants. Fannie's sister Betsey and her husband, William, are on the list, as are several other Anderson-Jones relatives. The name "Fannie" does not appear, but Frances Anderson is on the list. If Frances and Fannie are alternate names for the same person, this would explain how Fannie got from Oxford, NC, to Washington Court House.

To summarize, this piecing together of the facts would mean that Fannie James was born as Frances Jones during or before 1840; that she married Nelson Anderson in 1853; that she was the "Frankie Anderson" present alongside her sisters during the destruction of the family home in 1854; that she separated from Nelson and went to live with her mother by 1860, then using the name "Ann"; that she migrated to Ohio in 1863 using her married name, "Frances Anderson"; that by 1868 she was married to Samuel and was finally using the name we know her by, "Fannie James." This plausible sequence was one of the most tantalizing discoveries on our 2022 research trip to North Carolina.

Many more details of Fannie's life story are documented in *Pioneers of Jewell*. Briefly, Fannie and Samuel relocated south to Florida, lived in Tallahassee in 1880, in Cocoa in 1885, and then later that year moved to the future Lake Worth Beach and took out their homestead claim on the western shore of the lake.

Recovering the childhood background of Fannie's younger sister Lucy has proved to be an even greater challenge. We knew previously that as adults, Fannie and Lucy were close. According to the 1880 census, they lived next door to each other in Tallahassee. In 1891, Lucy sent a pair of shoes to Florida from Baltimore for Samuel James, as reported in the *Tropical Sun* newspaper. Later, they collaborated on over a dozen real estate deals in the Lake Worth area between 1903 and 1914.

But interestingly, we don't have any evidence that Lucy ever visited Palm Beach. County records indicate that Lucy granted Fannie Power of Attorney while Lucy was a resident of Baltimore, Maryland. These deals were done by Fannie on Lucy's behalf.

Looking for information on Lucy from before 1880 mainly proved futile. We encountered no earlier references to her in county records. The only possible reference we could find was in the 1850 Census for a “Louisa Jones” living with Nancy in Milton, age 12. Yet Lucy could have been no more than two at the time. Could this be another census taker mistake? All things considered, Lucy was probably born around 1848 or 1849, before her father Henry’s apparent death around 1849. As previously discussed, it is very possible that Lucy, like her sisters, intentionally understated her age to improve her marriage prospects.

After days of pouring through historical records, our eyes were blurry and our heads were full of more questions than we had when we arrived. Nevertheless, we did find some significant information about Fannie James, her relatives, and the circumstances in the region of North Carolina where she was born. Fannie’s family were free, light-skinned people of color, as was common in that area. The family exhibited many of the entrepreneurial traits that Fannie and Samuel showed when they came to Florida. They were landowners and real estate traders, astute in financial affairs, and could handle themselves in legal disputes. They were successful and lived on excellent terms with their white neighbors.

Our new discoveries underscore the praise Fannie James received in her Palm Beach County obituary:

Mr. and Mrs. James.... took up a homestead on the present site of Lake Worth and were instrumental in building up this section of the county. Mrs. James was well beloved by all who knew her and enjoyed a wide acquaintanceship among the residents of the county. (*Daily Tropical Sun*, March 8, 1915)