Rooted in Bentonville: The Black Families and Untold Stories Beyond the Battlefield

Christina Benton

Abstract

Bentonville, North Carolina, is widely known for the Civil War battle fought there in March 1865, yet the history of the people who made the surrounding countryside home extends across generations before and after the fighting. This article traces the lives of the Benton and Cox families through slavery, emancipation, and the development of Black family and community life in Johnston and Wayne Counties. Drawing on census schedules, land and vital records, church histories, photographs, and descendant knowledge, it follows relationships that linked households across farms, roads, and county lines. Particular attention is given to James M. Benton and Cherry Cox, their son James Benton, and his wife, Georgianna Cox, a midwife whose work connected her to families throughout the community. The article also considers how descendants' lives and accomplishments carry this history into the present. In centering the people who lived and worked in Bentonville, it brings forward a community history often overshadowed by the battle for which the place is best known.

Keywords: Bentonville; African American history; family history; emancipation; community; North Carolina

In the pine country around Mill Creek, summer announced itself through scent before the day had fully warmed. Resin sweetened the air beneath the trees, mingling with the smell of damp earth and fallen needles, while the low places breathed out the coolness of leaves and dark water.

Morning light found its way through the branches and settled across the forest floor, where pine straw lay thick beneath the trunks. Beyond the woods, fields opened around scattered houses and outbuildings, and narrow roads wound through the countryside, passing stretches of cultivated ground before disappearing again among the trees. Rain softened those roads into mud that clung to wheels and hooves; in dry weather, the same ruts loosened into dust that rose behind passing wagons and hung for a time in the warm air. Along those roads, neighbors traveled between homes, farms, and the small settlement that would become Bentonville.

This was the world into which James M. Benton was born around 1846, a world already divided by boundaries he had no power to draw. The land around Mill Creek belonged to men whose names appeared on deeds and maps, while the people who worked it could be entered among their possessions, their ages and assigned values recorded beside the property on which another family's wealth depended. For those held in bondage, the reach of an owner's authority extended into the most intimate parts of life, shaping where they worked, where they lived, and whether they could remain with the people they loved. Yet families and relationships took root within and across those boundaries. Kin lived on neighboring properties, familiar names passed between households, and the roads and paths through the countryside carried people toward one another as well as toward the work demanded of them. Children grew up knowing parents, siblings, elders, and neighbors whose connections could reach beyond the land on which they lived. The Black Bentons belonged to this world, and the ties that sustained them would continue to shape their family and community long after emancipation changed the countryside around them.

John Benton, the man for whom the village would be named, had come to Johnston County from neighboring Sampson County, bringing with him a name already rooted in the countryside to the south. He was a son of Alexander Benton and a brother to another Alexander, whose plantation and mill lay southwest of Bentonville, near Newton Grove. Between the brothers' properties stretched the roads and farms that joined the two counties, placing their households within reach of one another even as each established himself on his own land. Their sisters, Polly Benton, Ann Blackman, Patsy Royal, and Betsy Cox, connected the family to other households across that same countryside. The names Benton, Blackman, Royal, and Cox belonged to a network of kin whose lives and property reached across county lines, linking John's beginnings in Sampson County to the place he would come to call home in Johnston.[1]

In 1838, the death of John and Alexander's father set the machinery of inheritance in motion, and the work of dividing his estate began. Alexander Benton Sr., the father of John and Alexander Benton, held land and enslaved people in Sampson County, where his family's life was tied to the ownership and inheritance of property. His children included John, Alexander, Polly, Ann, Patsy, and Betsy, whose households extended the family's connections through Sampson County and into neighboring Johnston County. Following his death, an estate accounting brought those connections together on paper, setting out the property and advancements associated with his heirs. On the pages of the accounting, land, money, and human lives were gathered into columns and assigned values as the heirs' portions were determined. John's portion included land valued at $1,000, other advancements of $303.10, and an enslaved person named Vinney, valued at $500. His brother Alexander's portion named three enslaved men, Toney, Robert, and Lewis. The record preserves these names within the accounting of a family estate, revealing how land

and the lives of enslaved people figured in the wealth passed among Alexander Sr.'s children. Their names appeared alongside the figures used to settle the estate, each person counted within the wealth being distributed among the Benton heirs. With the division, Vinney, Toney, Robert, and Lewis passed into the hands of the next generation of Bentons, their lives bound to decisions made over property and inheritance. For John, the settlement added to the resources that would support his life in Johnston County; for the people named in the estate, it marked another moment in which their futures were determined by someone else's claim of ownership.

For Vinney, whose name appeared among the property accounted for in Alexander Benton Sr.'s estate, the division marked another passage within a life already subject to other people's decisions. The accounting placed him in John Benton's portion, connecting his name to the man who would establish his home in Johnston County. By 1850, an unnamed man recorded as fifty-seven appeared on John's slave schedule; ten years later, the schedule listed a man recorded as sixty. Vinney may have been the man represented in one or both entries, though the schedules do not provide names that would establish the identification. Read together, the estate accounting and census schedules suggest a possible connection between the Benton holdings in Sampson County and John's household near Mill Creek, where the history of the Black Benton family would come into view.[2, 8, 10]

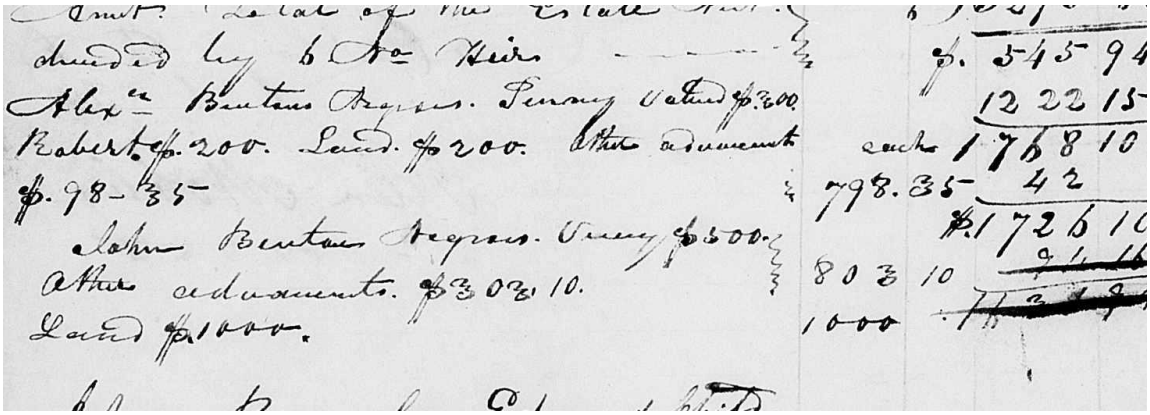


Figure 1. Alexander Benton Sr. estate division, Sampson County, showing John Benton's inheritance, including Vinney.

John Benton enlarged his holdings through a purchase of land from John J. Collier, adding to the property he was gathering in Johnston County. A survey made in May 1844 traced another seventy-five acres south of Mill Creek, adjoining land belonging to Nathan Williams and land Benton already held. On paper, the survey followed the boundaries of the tract; on the ground, the creek and its branches wound through a countryside of woods, roads, and neighboring properties. Benton's holdings formed part of that larger landscape, extending beyond the house and yard into land that could be worked, crossed, and divided. Within this landscape lived the Black people whose labor was claimed by John and whose lives would become part of Bentonville's history.[3]

To the southwest, John's brother Alexander established his own plantation and mill in the farming country around Newton Grove. In 1850, the census recorded twelve enslaved people under Alexander's name. The brothers' properties lay within a countryside connected by roads that passed farms and woodlands across the adjoining counties. Grain, livestock, cotton, and pine products moved through this landscape, supplying households and making their way toward markets beyond them. Along those same roads stood the homes and workplaces of people whose

lives were bound to the land in different ways, including the enslaved men, women, and children whose labor supported the Benton brothers' holdings.[4]



Figure 2. Annotated historical map showing Bentonville and Alexander Benton's property near Newton Grove.

Across the pine country, the woods held a working rhythm of their own. Axes opened the bark of living trees, leaving exposed faces where resin slowly gathered in the warmth. Workers returned to the same trunks again and again, collecting the thick gum and carrying it from tree to tree, their hands and tools growing sticky with the substance. The work meant long hours beneath the pines, bending to gather what had collected and lifting the weight of it for the journey out of the woods. At the distillery, the gum was heated until its vapors could be drawn off and cooled into spirits of turpentine, leaving rosin behind. Smoke from the furnace mingled with the sharp scent of pine, while barrels were filled for transport and sale. Across the region, the demand for these

products joined the labor of the woods to roads and markets beyond the farms where the pines stood.[5]

By 1849, Bentonville had a post office, and the small settlement had become a market for the naval stores produced in the surrounding pine country. A carriage shop stood among its businesses, serving a community that depended on wheels, wagons, and horses to move people and goods across the countryside. Along the roads leading into the village, hooves pressed into the sandy ground, harness shifted with the movement of animals, and wagon wheels followed ruts worn by earlier journeys. Farmers and tradespeople brought the products of their work toward Bentonville, while the labor of enslaved people helped sustain the farms, woodlands, and households from which those goods came. The village took shape through these connections, its daily life tied to the land around it and to the people whose work kept goods moving along its roads.[6]

As Bentonville developed, John Benton's land began to pass into other hands, one parcel at a time. In 1852, Henry Britt acquired an acre, followed two years later by D. H. Bridgers, who acquired six acres and then another lot in 1858. A later conveyance to Miles S. Draughan added another name to the records of land once held by Benton. In 1873, an acre was conveyed to a school committee, setting aside a piece of that property for the community's educational use. Together, the deeds trace a gradual division of Benton's holdings as individual tracts became connected to the people and institutions taking their places within the growing settlement.[7]

For the people enslaved on John Benton's land, those years passed in work that followed the seasons, as children grew and the adults around them grew older. In 1850, the census enumerator recorded nine people beneath John's name. The oldest was the fifty-seven-year-old man noted earlier. There were also two women of twenty-five, a sixteen-year-old girl, three younger girls aged nine, seven, and five, and two boys who were four years old. The enumerator classified the nine-year-old girl and one of the boys as "mulatto," recording the others as Black. No names were entered for them, and the schedule gives no indication of their relationships to one another. What remains on the page is a record of nine people at different stages of life, living under the authority of the same man, their ages marking the distance between the oldest among them and the two small boys just beginning their lives.[8]

The available evidence suggests that one of the four-year-old boys recorded in John Benton's household may have been James M. Benton. His age in later records is consistent with a birth around 1846, and the 1880 census index records him under the same racial classification assigned to one of the boys in 1850. The slave schedule, however, did not record the children's names, leaving the identification unresolved. Around the two boys were adults who had already lived for decades under slavery and children whose lives were beginning alongside their own. Enslaved women's responsibilities could extend beyond the labor demanded by an enslaver to preparing food, maintaining clothing, caring for children, and tending to sickness. For the youngest, childhood unfolded within a world where the demands placed upon the adults around them left little separation between the work of sustaining a family and the work required by those who claimed ownership of them.[8, 13]

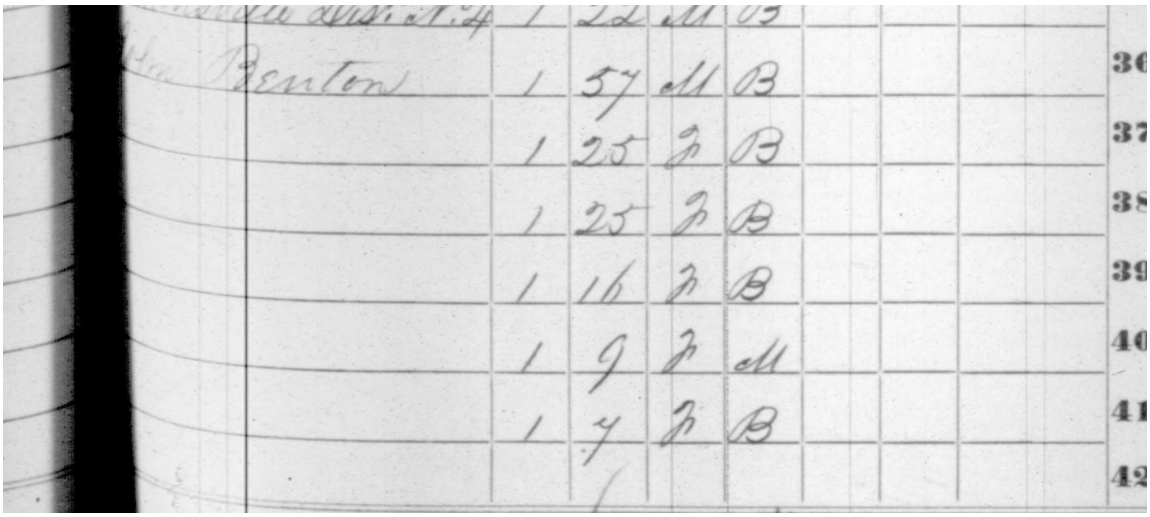


Figure 3a. Detail of the 1850 Johnston County slave schedule, showing the beginning of John Benton's entry.

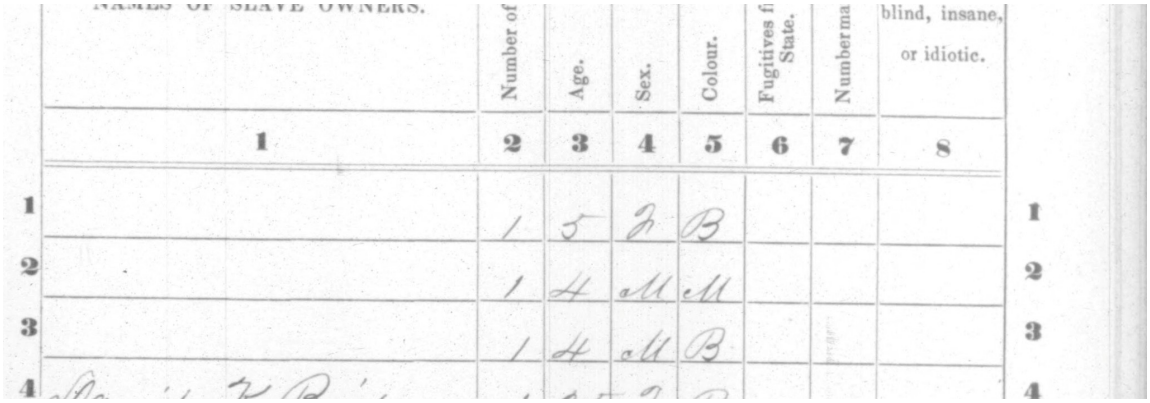
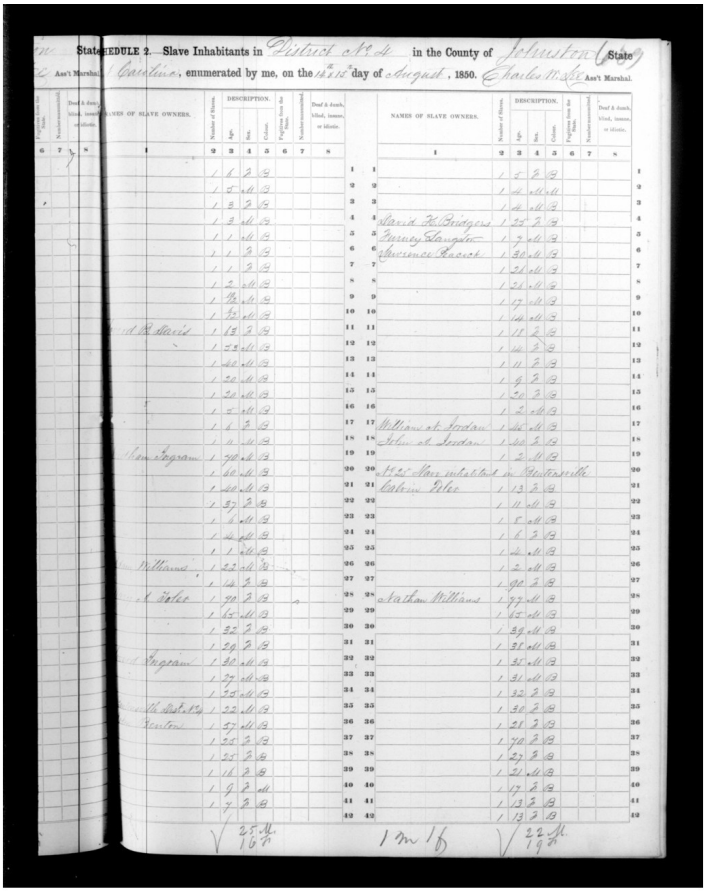


Figure 3b. Continuation of John Benton's entry in the 1850 slave schedule, including two four-year-old boys.

1850 Johnston County: Original Schedule Image

District No. 4 | John Benton: left lines 36-41; right lines 1-3 | NARA M432, reel 653



https://archive.org/details/populationschedu0653unix/page/n327/mode/1up

Figure 4. Full 1850 Johnston County slave schedule page containing John Benton's entry.

Around the time James was born, Rachel Benton and Arthur Williams began a union that would continue through the final decades of slavery and into freedom. Their relationship appears in the 1866 Johnston County cohabitation records, where they acknowledged a union beginning in 1846. The Benton and Williams names belonged to the same local landscape: land associated with the two families lay near Mill Creek, within a countryside crossed by roads that joined neighboring farms. For Rachel and Arthur, sustaining a family under slavery meant doing so within a system that denied legal recognition to their marriage and left enslaved people

vulnerable to separation. Their decision to register their union after emancipation placed a relationship of twenty years into the public record, preserving the names of two people whose lives had begun together long before the law acknowledged them.[9]

By 1870, a Rachel Williams appeared in the census just three households after James Benton, in a household with Archer Williams. Their proximity, Rachel's earlier Benton surname, and the appearance of the Williams name in both records raise the possibility that these were the same Rachel and Arthur recorded in 1866 and that Rachel was related to James. The surviving records do not establish either connection, but they place the question within the close network of households that emerged around the Benton family after emancipation.[9]

A decade later, the 1860 slave schedule recorded thirteen people under John Benton's name. The oldest was a man entered as sixty, followed by two women of thirty-five and four younger women and girls recorded as twenty-one, eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen. A fourteen-year-old boy appeared among them, along with five younger boys aged nine, seven, five, three, and one. All were classified as Black in that enumeration. The fourteen-year-old's age is consistent with that of a child born around 1846, but the schedule provides no name to establish whether he was James Benton or either of the boys recorded in 1850. Like the earlier schedule, the 1860 record offers only a narrow glimpse of the people whose lives it counted: an older man, adults in their working years, children approaching adulthood, and a one-year-old boy whose life had just begun.[10]

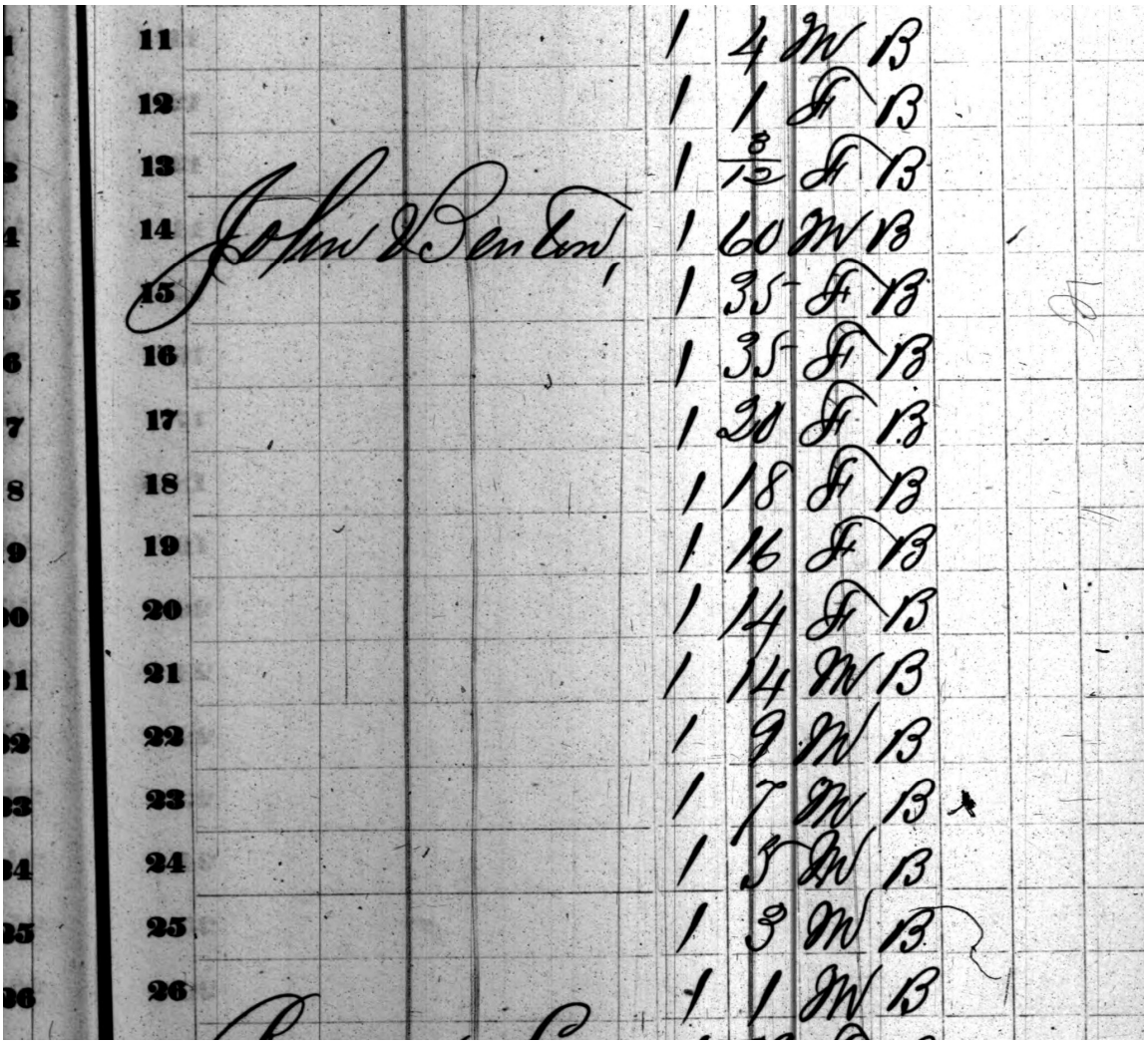
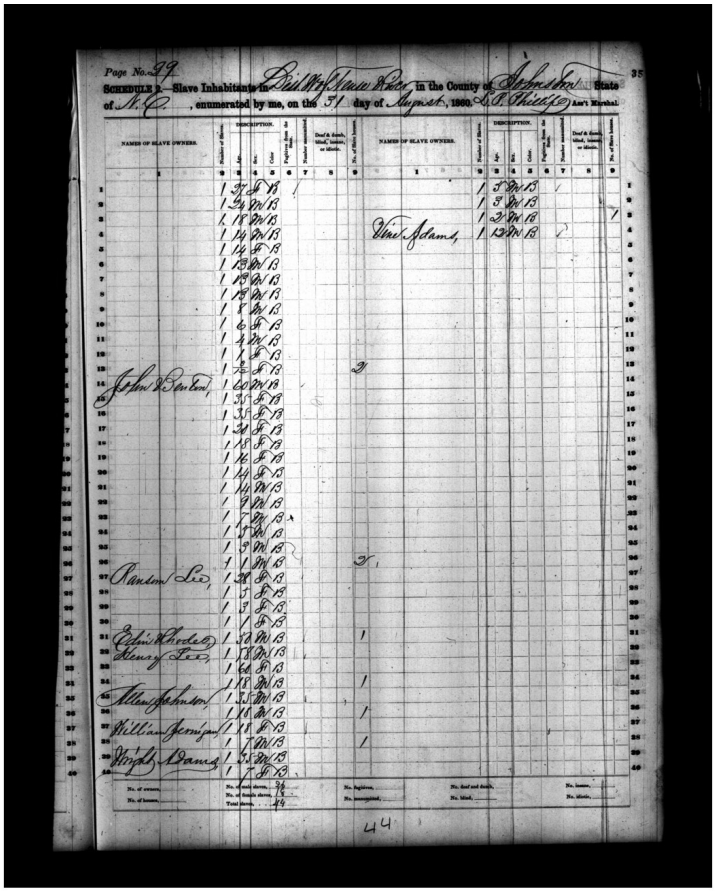


Figure 5. Detail of John Benton's entry in the 1860 Johnston County slave schedule.

1860 Johnston County: Original Schedule Image

District west of Neuse River | page 29 / stamped 35 | NARA M653, reel 924



Page No. 29 — SCHEDULE 2. — Slave Inhabitants in Dist. W. of Neuse River in the County of Johnston State of N. C., enumerated by me, on the 31 day of August, 1860. D. S. Sheiles Ass't Marshal.

https://archive.org/details/populationschedu924unit/page/n72/mode/1up

Figure 6. Full 1860 Johnston County slave schedule page containing John Benton's entry.

In March 1865, the roads that carried people and goods through Bentonville filled with soldiers, artillery, horses, and military wagons. For three days, from March 19 through March 21, Confederate and Union armies fought across the surrounding countryside, turning farms and fields into ground to be taken or defended. Gunfire carried through the pine woods, smoke moved among the trees, and the roads that had connected neighboring households became routes for advancing troops, equipment, and wounded men. The battle unfolded across a landscape

where families had built their lives and where work had continued through the seasons long before the armies arrived.

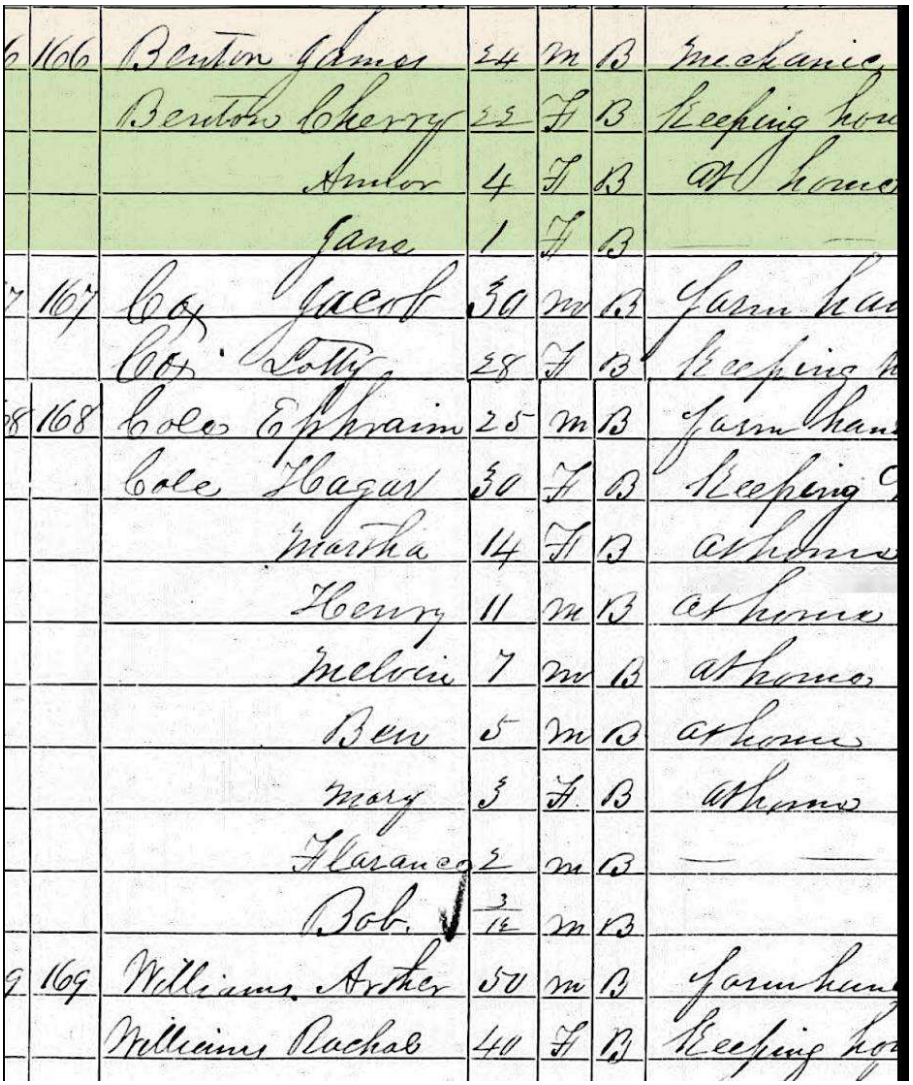
Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston established his headquarters in John Benton's yard, while a nearby log building served as a principal field hospital. Other buildings in the village also held casualties, bringing the wounded into spaces that had been part of the settlement's ordinary life. When Confederate troops withdrew, they burned stocks of naval stores, and further destruction followed during the Union occupation. The turpentine and rosin gathered from the surrounding pine country, products of work carried from the trees to the distillery and then to market, fed the fires that burned in the village.[11]

James Benton would have been about nineteen that spring, approaching adulthood as the war that would end slavery drew to a close. Rachel Benton and Arthur Williams had already shared nearly twenty years together, much of their life as a couple spent under a system that gave them no legal protection as husband and wife. The fighting at Bentonville came near the end of that order, but its collapse did not erase the years that had shaped the people who lived there. Freedom opened new possibilities for families to have their relationships recognized and to make decisions about their own lives, even as they remained within a countryside where land and power had long been held by others.[11]

Like Rachel and Arthur, many couples carried their relationships into the public record after emancipation. On March 20, 1868, James Benton married Cherry Cox. Her name appears as Cheny, Cherry, and Chillie in the records used to follow her life and her connection to the next generation of Bentons.[12]

By 1870, James Benton was twenty-four years old and earning his living as a mechanic, a term then used for a skilled tradesman. The census does not identify his particular trade. Cherry kept house, her work sustaining a household in the years after emancipation. The census placed them among other Black families in Bentonville Township, including Jacob and Patty Cox, Ephraim and Hagar Cole, and Archer and Rachel Williams. These names appeared close together on the enumerator's page, offering a glimpse of a community whose members lived and worked within reach of one another. Though the census recorded each household separately, the marriages and family connections that emerge in later records show relationships that extended across those lines.

Their son James, born around 1870, entered a family whose older generation had known slavery and was building its life in freedom. As he grew, the people around him carried memories and experiences that reached back before the war, while the community in which he came of age continued to take shape through work, family, and worship. His life would connect the generation of James and Cherry to the children and grandchildren who followed, carrying the Benton story into a new century.[13]



166	Benton James	24	m	B	Mechanic
	Benton Cherry	22	F	B	Keeping house
	Anton	4	F	B	At home
	Jane	1	F	B	
167	Cox Jacob	30	m	B	Farm hand
	Cox Polly	28	F	B	Keeping house
168	Cole Ephraim	25	m	B	Farm hand
	Cole Hagar	30	F	B	Keeping house
	Martha	14	F	B	at home
	Henry	11	m	B	at home
	Melvin	7	m	B	at home
	Ben	5	m	B	at home
	Mary	3	F	B	at home
	Clarance	2	m	B	— —
	Bob	3/12	m	B	
169	Williams Arther	50	m	B	Farm hand
	Williams Rachal	40	F	B	Keeping house

Figure 7. The 1870 census entry for James and Cherry Benton and neighboring households in Bentonville Township.

While James and Cherry established their household, John Benton was making arrangements for the property he would leave behind. In his will, dated May 9, 1872, he directed that $2,000 be given to Betsy Cox and that the remainder of his estate pass to the surviving children of his sister Patsy Royal and his brother Alexander. The document carried the names of relatives whose connections reached back to Sampson County and extended through the families established around Bentonville. Through these bequests, the property and wealth John had gathered during his lifetime were directed toward another generation of his kin.[14]

Another account of John survived outside the formal language of deeds and wills. A local story tells of a woman associated with him who spoke of allowing geese to feed on his grave, an insult remembered long after the exchange itself. The story offers a glimpse of how John was recalled in village memory, where the man for whom Bentonville was named remained a subject of conversation alongside the land and bequests preserved in the written record.[15]

Elsewhere in Bentonville that same year, a Black congregation began gathering beneath a brush arbor. Bentonville Disciples of Christ Church was established in 1872, seven years after emancipation, as families across the region were building their lives in freedom. Beneath branches arranged for shelter, members came together for worship in the countryside they called home. In the church's early years, the Reverend John James Harper and his brother-in-law, the Reverend Nathan Hood, preached to the congregation there.[16]

Harper's presence connects the church to another family whose history reached across the years before and after the war. He was the son of John and Amy Harper, whose farm stood near Bentonville and whose household had included enslaved men, women, and children. The elder Harpers belonged to a local world in which slavery had shaped both the land and the relationships among the people who lived on it. After emancipation, John James Harper's ministry brought him into the life of a Black congregation whose members were establishing their place in the community as free people.

For the congregation, the church offered a place to gather in worship among neighbors and relatives in the years following the war. Its history became part of the history of Black Bentonville, connecting families who had known the countryside under slavery to the children and grandchildren who grew up after emancipation. The church cemetery would also become a place of remembrance for those families. Among the people buried there was James Benton, the younger son of James and Cherry, whose life was only beginning when the congregation first gathered beneath the arbor.

For families traveling to worship, the journey belonged to the horse-and-buggy world preserved in family photographs. Wheels followed roads through the countryside, passing fields and homes before reaching the places where neighbors gathered. The pace of a horse allowed the landscape to unfold gradually: stretches of woodland gave way to cultivated ground, and familiar roads carried families between the households, churches, and communities that were part of their lives. Those same roads also led to the churchyards where, in time, generations would bring their loved ones to rest.[16]



Figure 8. Christina Benton and a family member at Bentonville Disciples of Christ Church.

In the Brogden and Princeton area, another Black congregation began taking root in 1878. Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church received land the following year from William A. Smith for a church, a school, and a burial ground. Smith's farm lay to the east, and his marriage to Polly Ann Peacock Atkinson, the widow of plantation owner Elijah Atkinson, connected him to the area's older landholding families. Smith had enslaved people before the Civil War and later became a Unionist. The land he conveyed would serve a community whose members needed places to worship, educate their children, and bury their dead. At Shiloh, these purposes came together on the same ground, giving families a place that would hold both the daily life of the community and the memory of those who came before them.[17]

Among the families drawn into Shiloh's life were the Coxes and Atkinsons, tenant farmers and laborers whose homes lay throughout the surrounding countryside. Lewis Cox, Georgianna's father, belonged to this community, where family relationships extended between neighboring households and across the roads leading to the church. Most worshippers lived within roughly five miles of Shiloh, close enough for the church grounds to become a familiar destination for families whose lives were rooted in the farms and settlements nearby. For the Coxes and others who gathered there, Shiloh stood within a landscape already made meaningful by the people they knew and the lives they shared.

On the church property, children attended school where their families also came together for worship. Schooling continued there into the early 1930s, extending into the church building erected around 1920. Inside were a wooden floor, plain benches, tall windows, and a raised dais. Light entered through the windows and fell across the boards beneath the feet of children and worshippers who returned to the building over the years. Beyond the church, the cemetery held the graves of members of the surrounding community, including people whose families had worked the land and gathered at Shiloh across generations.[17]



Figure 9. Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church, Johnston County, North Carolina.

Georgianna's Cox family had roots in Wayne County before their lives became closely entwined with Shiloh. Her grandmother Mary Cox, born around 1812, appears in the family's history with children named Lewis, Jerry, Henry, and Mary. Lewis, Georgianna's father, formed a household with Sarah Thompson, and their union was recorded in 1867. The records that follow their family carry them from Wayne County into Johnston County: they appear in Boon Hill Township in 1880 and in Bentonville Township by 1900. Across those years, their household grew, children reached adulthood, and grandchildren became part of the family gathered around them.

The Cox family reunion history names ten children of Lewis and Sarah: Zena, Moriah, Georgianna, Hettie, William Roger, Pharaba, Jenetta, James M., Alexander, and Dallas. In 1880,

Moriah, Georgianna, Hettie, William, and Pharaba were recorded in their parents' Boon Hill household, still children living together under the same roof. Later records and family accounts follow the children into households of their own, where marriages and succeeding generations carried the Cox name into connection with the Benton, Jones, Atkinson, Anderson, and Raynor families. Their lives joined places across Wayne and Johnston Counties, while Shiloh remained one of the grounds on which their family history could be remembered.[18, a]

Georgianna was about six years old in 1880, one of the children growing up in Lewis and Sarah Cox's household. As she and her siblings grew older, their marriages and children carried the family into other households while keeping many of those relationships within the surrounding countryside. Georgianna's sister Moriah married Dawson Jones, and their daughters Rhoda and Rosetta later married Isham and Edward Atkinson. Another branch of the family reached the Raynors through Louise Cox, a daughter of Georgianna's brother Dallas and his wife Frances Everett. Louise married Charles Raynor, adding another connection to a network of families whose names would continue to appear together in the generations that followed.[19, b]

Farther southwest, around Newton Grove, other people bearing the Cox name held land and enslaved people. A published account of the 1850 census records Moses Cox with forty-two enslaved people and J. Blackman Cox with twenty-seven. Coxes Store had also given its name to part of the area's commercial life. These holdings belonged to the broader countryside around the Benton properties, but the presence of the Cox surname alone does not establish a connection to Georgianna's family. Her documented family story follows Mary Cox, her son Lewis, Sarah

Thompson, and their children through Wayne and Johnston Counties and into the Black community around Shiloh.[20]

Christmas had scarcely passed in 1896 when James Benton, the son of James and Cherry Benton, married Georgianna Cox at her father Lewis Cox's home. The marriage record, dated December 29, brought the names of both families together on a single page. James's parents appeared as James and Cherry Benton, while Georgianna's were recorded as Lewis and Sarah Cox. Cherry had died by then, but her name remained beside her husband's in the record of their son's marriage. With this union, the Benton and Cox names met again: a generation after the elder James had married Cherry Cox, their son joined his life with that of another daughter of the Cox family.[21, c]

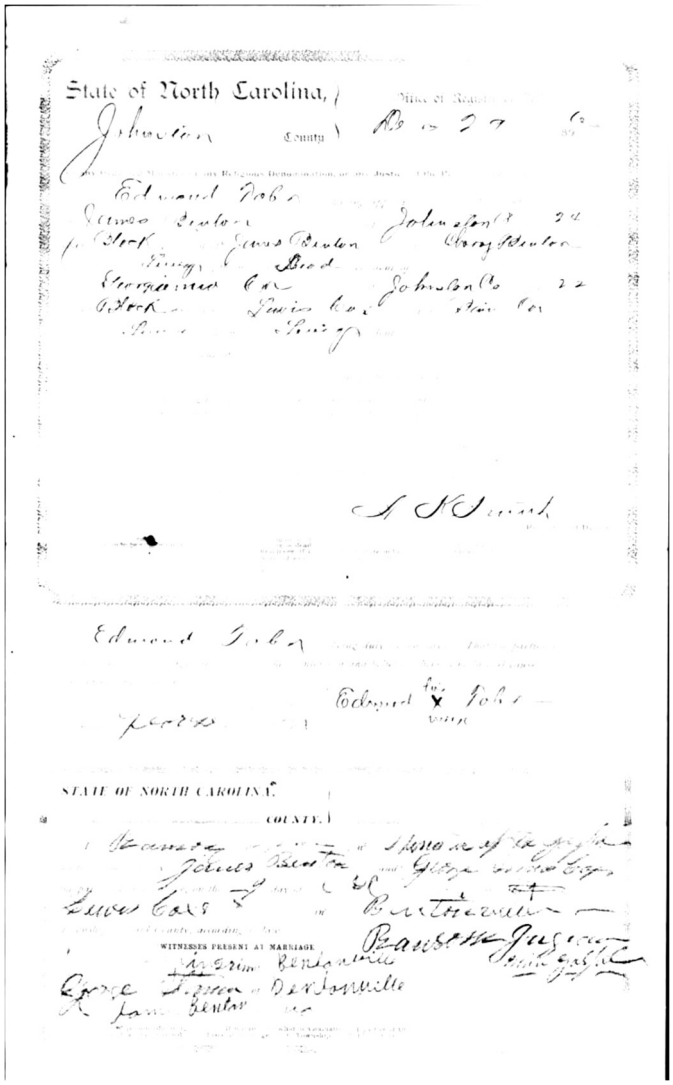


Figure 10. Marriage record of James Benton and Georgianna Cox, December 29, 1896.

James and Georgianna made their life in the countryside among the relatives and neighbors whose names recur throughout the records of Bentonville and Shiloh. James farmed, and their household grew to include the children remembered in the family history, among them James E., known as Jack, and Johnnie. Georgianna's responsibilities extended beyond her own home. She also worked as a midwife, entering the lives of other families at the moments when mothers and newborn children needed care. Her place in the community was shaped by both kinds of work: raising her own children and attending to the needs of other households as their families grew.[22]

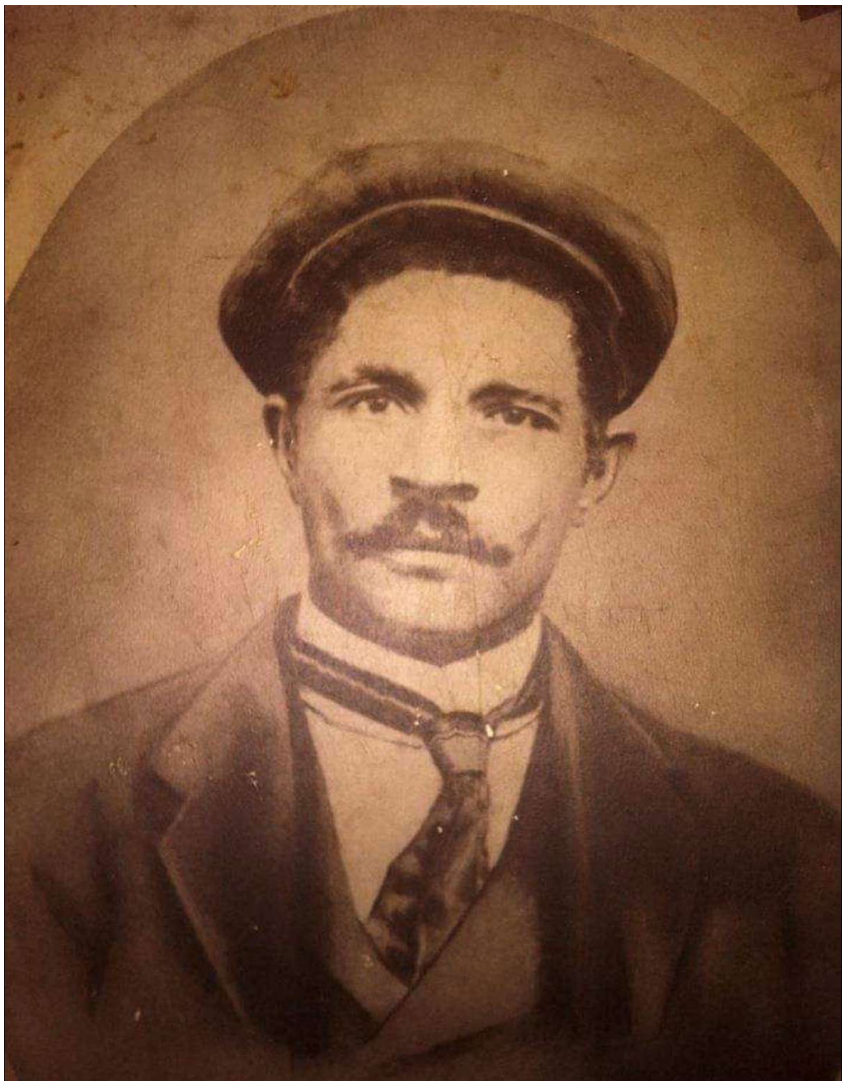


Figure 11. Portrait of James Benton, husband of Georgianna Cox.

Records name fourteen children of James and Georgianna: Lenora, James E., known as Jack, Clyda, Milton, Lenlie, Roger, Paul, Georgia, Alton, Malden, Wilbert, Milford, Scall, and Johnnie. As the children grew and established families of their own, their lives carried the Benton story into another generation. Lenora Benton Atkinson Holt and Georgia Benton Atkinson connected the family to the Atkinsons, while Clyda Benton Jones and her husband, Silas Jones, joined the Benton and Jones lines. These relationships formed part of a wider network that also included Georgianna's sister Moriah Cox Jones and Moriah's daughters Rhoda

and Rosetta, who married Isham and Edward Atkinson. Through these branches, the names of the families gathered around Shiloh and Bentonville continued to appear together in the generations that followed.[23]

Alongside the work of raising her own family, Georgianna attended other women as a midwife. Across rural North Carolina, a call for a midwife could arrive at any hour, interrupting the work of the day or drawing her along the road after dark. Midwives prepared for births with supplies that might include clean cloths and clothing, soap, scissors, and material for tying the cord. At the home, there was water to warm, a bed to prepare, and a mother to attend through the hours of labor. The work continued after the baby arrived, as mother and child both needed care. For Georgianna, midwifery placed her within the intimate life of neighboring households at moments when families depended on her presence and knowledge.[24]

Georgianna's work belonged to a wider tradition of care in which women's knowledge moved between homes and generations. The families who called on a midwife placed their trust in someone who could attend a mother through labor and help care for her and her newborn afterward. For Georgianna, that work existed alongside her life as a mother and daughter within the Benton and Cox families, carrying her from her own household into the homes of others in the surrounding community.

During Georgianna's lifetime, public health officials in North Carolina increasingly sought to regulate and supervise midwives through permits, equipment standards, demonstrations, and birth reporting. Their efforts to provide practical instruction were accompanied by racial

prejudice. In 1929, discussions among public health officials included language that disparaged Black midwives and encouraged families to turn away from them. Such judgments stood alongside the knowledge Black midwives brought to their work and the trust they had earned among the families who depended on their care.[24]

James Benton died in Boon Hill Township in 1916 and was buried at Bentonville Disciple Church Cemetery, the church whose congregation had taken root when he was a child. Georgianna continued to care for her family after his death and later married Cornelius Best as her children grew and established households of their own. Her parents, Lewis and Sarah Cox, were buried at Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church Cemetery, tying another part of the family's history to the church grounds where the Coxes had worshipped. The two cemeteries held members of a family joined through marriage and generations of life in the surrounding countryside.[25, d]



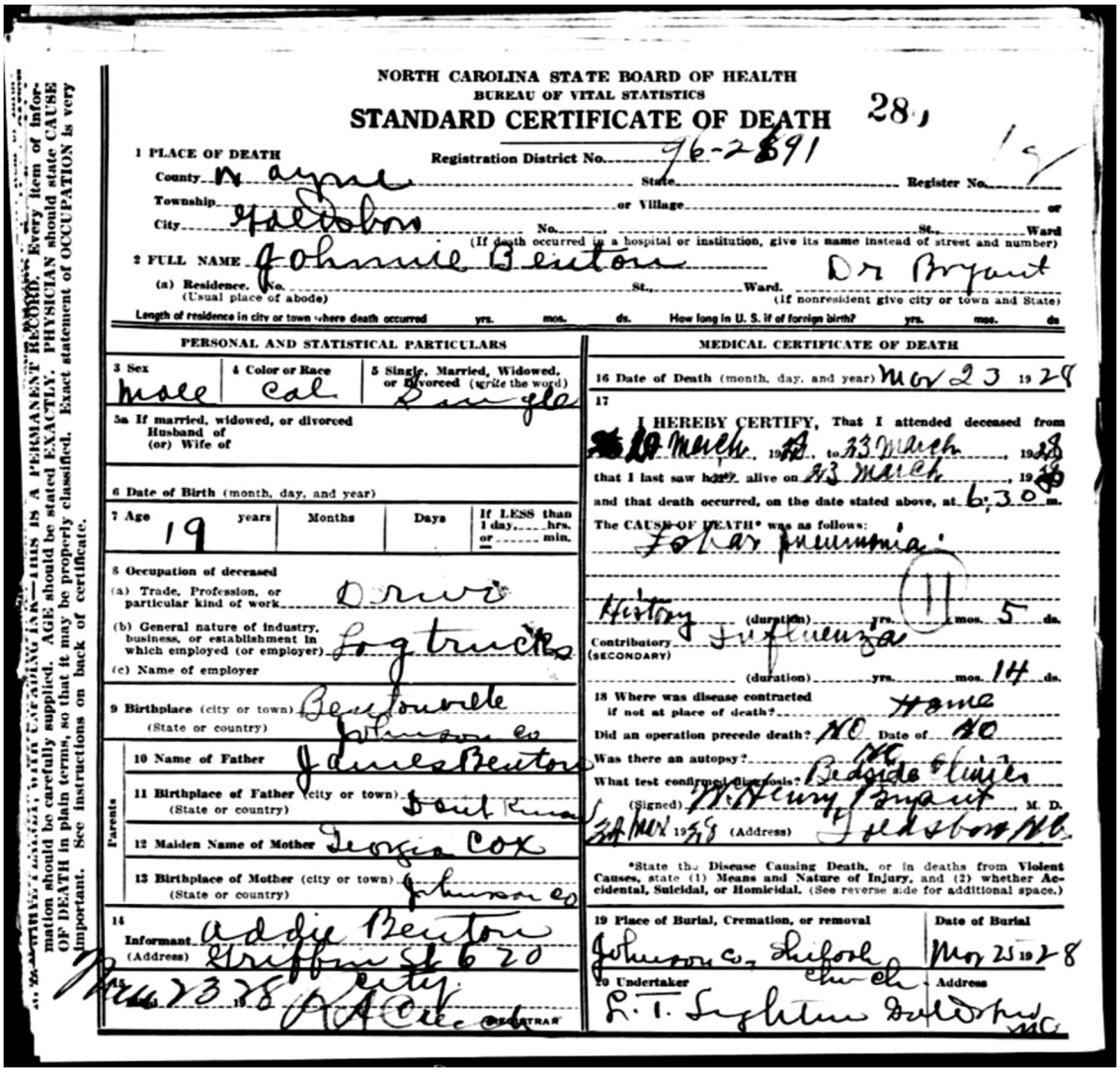
Figure 12. Grave marker of James Benton at Bentonville Disciple Church Cemetery.

By 1928, the family's story had reached Goldsboro, where several Bentons were living and working. The city directory listed Georgianna as a domestic at 107 Moore Street. Nearby, at 104 Moore Street, were entries for Johnnie Benton and Jack Benton, with Addie named alongside Jack. The addresses place them on the same street, keeping members of the family within reach of one another as their working lives carried them beyond the farms of Johnston County. For Georgianna and her sons, Goldsboro became another place where the family lived while their connections to Bentonville and Shiloh remained.[26]

Johnnie Benton earned his living driving log trucks, working in an industry that continued to draw upon the forests of eastern North Carolina. The motor truck had joined the older world of axes, teams, and wagon wheels, carrying timber along roads that connected the woods to towns such as Goldsboro. Beyond his work, Johnnie was a young father. He and Alma Barnes had a son named Johnny, whose name was spelled differently from his father's and who would carry the family line into another generation.

Their son was born in the middle of the 1920s, but his time with his father would be brief. On November 23, 1928, Johnnie died at nineteen years old. His death certificate recorded lobar pneumonia as the cause, with influenza contributing to the illness. His young son was left to grow up without the father whose name he carried.

Addie Benton supplied the information recorded on Johnnie's death certificate, identifying his parents as James Benton and Georgia Cox. The Goldsboro directory listed Addie alongside Jack Benton, identified in the family history as Johnnie's brother, suggesting that she was his sister-in-law. Through the details she provided, the certificate preserved the names of Johnnie's parents and the family connections surrounding a life that had ended so early.[27]



NORTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH 28

1 PLACE OF DEATH — Registration District No. 76-2891
County Wayne — State — Register No.
Township — or Village — or
City Goldsboro — No. — St. — Ward
(If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its name instead of street and number)
2 FULL NAME Johnnie Benton — Dr Bryant
(a) Residence. No. — St. — Ward. (if nonresident give city or town and State)
(Usual place of abode)
Length of residence in city or town where death occurred — yrs. — mos. — ds. — How long in U. S. if of foreign birth? — yrs. — mos. — ds.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3 Sex: Male — 4 Color or Race: Col — 5 Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced (write the word): Single
5a If married, widowed, or divorced — Husband of (or) Wife of
6 Date of Birth (month, day, and year)
7 Age: 19 years — Months — Days — If LESS than 1 day, hrs. or min.
8 Occupation of deceased
(a) Trade, Profession, or particular kind of work: Driver
(b) General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which employed (or employer): Log trucks
(c) Name of employer
9 Birthplace (city or town) (State or country): Benfordale Johnson Co
Parents
10 Name of Father: James Benton
11 Birthplace of Father (city or town) (State or country): Dont Know
12 Maiden Name of Mother: Georgia Cox
13 Birthplace of Mother (city or town) (State or country): Johnson Co
14 Informant: Addie Benton (Address): Grifton St 620
Filed 3 28 City
Registrar

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

16 Date of Death (month, day, and year): Mch 23 1928
17
I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from 20 March 1928 to 23 March 1928
that I last saw him alive on 23 March 1928
and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at 6.30 a.m.
The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows:
Lobar pneumonia
History (duration) yrs. mos. 5 ds.
Contributory (SECONDARY) Influenza
(duration) yrs. mos. 14 ds.
18 Where was disease contracted if not at place of death? Home
Did an operation precede death? NO Date of NO
Was there an autopsy? NO
What test confirmed diagnosis? Bedside Clinical
(Signed) W. Henry Bryant M. D.
24 Mch 1928 (Address) Goldsboro NC
*State the Disease Causing Death, or in deaths from Violent Causes, state (1) Means and Nature of Injury, and (2) whether Accidental, Suicidal, or Homicidal. (See reverse side for additional space.)
19 Place of Burial, Cremation, or removal: Johnson Co Shiloh Church — Date of Burial: Mch 25 1928
20 Undertaker: E. T. Sights Sr Goldsboro NC — Address

IMPORTANT—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD. Every item of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PHYSICIAN should state CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of OCCUPATION is very important. See instructions on back of certificate.

Figure 13. Death certificate of Johnnie Benton, 1928.

Johnnie was buried at Shiloh, bringing him back from Goldsboro to the church ground associated with his mother's Cox family. His grave remained in Johnston County as Alma took their young son to Ohio, carrying the family's story beyond the North Carolina countryside where his father had lived and worked. The name Johnny traveled with the boy, linking him to a father he had little time to know.

Johnnie and Alma's son was the author's grandfather, and his son, also named Johnny, was her father. Through them, the Benton line continued beyond North Carolina while remaining connected to the people and places from which it had come. The generations that followed carried family names and memories into new lives, even as earlier generations remained at rest in the churchyards of Johnston County.[28]

At Shiloh, Georgianna's stone names her as Georgia Anna Benton, daughter of Lewis and Sarah Cox. At Bentonville Disciple Church Cemetery lies James, her husband and the father of their children. Between the two church grounds are the resting places of people whose lives joined the Benton and Cox families through marriage, parenthood, work, and worship. Shiloh also holds their son Johnnie, returned there after his death in Goldsboro.[29]



Figure 14. Christina Benton at the grave marker of Georgia Anna Benton at Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church Cemetery.

The generations that followed James and Georgianna carried the Benton and Cox family's history into many different fields of work and service. Education remained a part of that story through Doris Benton Smith, a daughter of Lenlie Benton and granddaughter of James and Georgianna, and her daughter Damesha Smith, who became a school principal. Other members of the wider family also entered classrooms as teachers and school leaders, continuing work that would have been difficult for earlier generations to imagine when access to education was restricted by slavery and segregation.[30]

Across the wider family, later generations pursued higher education, business, and ministry. Marcus Cox earned a master's degree in business administration from Winston-Salem State

University, while Areonia Myrkel Knight graduated with a degree in history, cum laude. Mable and Kevin Knight earned doctoral degrees in theology, and Kevin also became a licensed ordained minister. Kirsten Perry was recognized among the 2026 Outstanding Women in Business, while Doris Smith and Cheryl Richardson were honored for their contributions to the community. Ashley Richardson was recognized as Teacher of the Month at Brogden Middle School.[30]

Service to others took many forms across the family. Deborah Richardson Jones served in the Air Force and worked as a flight nurse. Elijah Dallas "Boot" Cox Jr., a Vietnam veteran and Purple Heart recipient, carried an injured soldier to safety while under fire. Other relatives served in the armed forces, entered nursing and law enforcement, became engineers and lawyers, and took leadership roles in churches and community organizations. Their accomplishments belonged to individual lives and, together, to a family history that had grown far beyond the households recorded in the nineteenth-century census.[30]

Among those descendants is the author, a daughter of the Benton line whose grandfather was the son of Johnnie Benton and Alma Barnes. A graduate of Howard University and the University of Tennessee, she taught at Winthrop University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte before continuing her work in archaeology, forensic anthropology, and descendant engagement. As a community liaison archaeologist at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the owner of Cultural Heritage Resource Impact Solutions, Inc., she works with communities and the histories of people whose lives and burial places have too often been overlooked. Her

personal research into Bentonville brings that work back to her own family, drawing together records, photographs, and the knowledge preserved by relatives.

The Benton and Cox families have continued across generations and across distances, with descendants building lives in North Carolina and elsewhere. Their stories reach from the people recorded under slavery to farmers, midwives, teachers, veterans, and professionals, each generation adding to a history that began long before the Battle of Bentonville. At Shiloh and Bentonville Disciple, the church grounds still hold the graves of people whose lives connected these families to one another and to the land. Their descendants carry that history forward, preserving the memory of a Black community that made Bentonville home before the armies arrived and continued to shape it long after they were gone.

Notes

a. The 1900 and 1910 censuses have been reported as recording fifteen and sixteen children born to Sarah Cox, respectively. A complete list of their children has not been established.

b. The 1867 cohabitation record names Lewis Cox's partner as Boney Thompson. Sarah's name also appears in records as Baine and Vainea.

c. Cherry Cox's precise relationship to Georgianna Cox has not been established.

d. James Benton's death certificate records March 10, 1916. The day on his gravestone appears different, but the weathered inscription cannot be read with certainty from the photograph.

References Cited

1. John Benton, will, May 9, 1872; Alexander Benton estate division, Sampson County, after the November 1838 court term, Benton family research collection.

2. Alexander Benton estate division, 1838, allotments to John and Alexander Benton, Benton family research collection.

3. John J. Collier to John Benton, deed, and John Benton survey, May 20, 1844, Benton family research collection.

4. Kent Wrench, "Early History of Newton Grove," Huckleberry Historian 35, no. 4 (April 2012): 6–8; historical map, Benton family research collection.

5. Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 338–344; James P. Barnett, Naval Stores (USDA Forest Service, 2019), 12–15.

6. North Carolina Civil War Trails, "Village of Bentonville," historical marker, 2005; 1870 census, Bentonville Township, p. 20, family 166.

7. John Benton conveyances to Henry Britt, D. H. Bridgers, Miles S. Draughan, and the school committee, 1852–1873, Benton family research collection.

8. 1850 United States census, Johnston County, North Carolina, slave schedule, John Benton entry, lines 36–41 and 1–3, National Archives microfilm M432, roll 653, image n327.

9. "Johnston County, North Carolina, Slave Marriages," Genealogy Trails, Arthur Williams and Rachel Benton entry; 1870 census, Bentonville Township, p. 20, families 166 and 169.

10. 1860 United States census, Johnston County, North Carolina, slave schedule, p. 29, lines 14–26, John Benton entry, National Archives microfilm M653, roll 924, image n72.

11. North Carolina Historic Sites, "History," Bentonville Battlefield; North Carolina Civil War Trails, "Village of Bentonville" and "Wounded and Abandoned"; North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Bentonville (HHH-21)," December 28, 2023.

12. Johnston County marriage register, male index, p. 12, James Benton and Cheny Cox, March 20, 1868; 1870 census, Bentonville Township, p. 20, family 166; James Benton death certificate, March 10, 1916.

13. 1870 census, Bentonville Township, p. 20, family 166; Johnston County Genealogy, 1880 census index, family 54, Benton family research collection. See also National Museum of African American History and Culture, “African Americans at Work: A Photo Essay,” on the historical use of “mechanic” for skilled trades.

14. John Benton, will, May 9, 1872, Benton family research collection.

15. Local oral tradition, reported by the author during family research discussions, November 2026.

16. Cassidy Joyner, “It Was Home,” Friends of Bentonville Battlefield, 2023; Benton family church photographs and family history.

17. Nancy Van Dolsen, Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church, National Register of Historic Places nomination, September 23, 2007, sections 7–8.

18. Cox Family Reunion Program, 17–21, 26–28.

19. Cox Family Reunion Program, July 4, 2026, 17–28, Benton family research collection.

20. Wrench, “Early History of Newton Grove,” 6–8.

21. Johnston County marriage license and return, James Benton and Georgianna Cox, December 29, 1896, Benton family research collection.

22. Cox Family Reunion Program, 9, 21–25.

23. Cox Family Reunion Program, 21–25.

24. Cox Family Reunion Program, 9; Hulda Cox, “Place of the Public Health Nurse in Maternity and Infancy Work,” North Carolina Public Health Association proceedings (1929), 565–570.

25. James Benton death certificate, Johnston County, March 10, 1916, certificate 7; family gravestone photograph; Cox Family Reunion Program, 20, 24.

26. Hill Directory Company, Goldsboro City Directory (1928), 64–65, Benton family entries.

27. Johnnie Benton death certificate, Wayne County, November 23, 1928, register 17; Goldsboro City Directory (1928), 64–65; Cox Family Reunion Program, 21, 24–25.

28. Author, descendant testimony and family research discussions, November 2026.

29. Benton family photographs of James Benton's and Georgia Anna Benton's gravestones, Benton family research collection.

30. Cox Family Reunion Program, 2–3, 7–10; author, descendant testimony, November 2026.