

**The Family of Henrietta Phelps Lawson Jeffries of Halifax
County Virginia and Caswell County, North Carolina
Written and Compiled By: Latham Mark Phelps**



Henrietta Phelps Lawson Jeffries 1857-1926



Henrietta Phelps Lawson Jeffries And Allen Jeffries

Henrietta Phelps Lawson Jeffries (b. 5 Jan. 1857 - d. 22 Aug 1926)

Born a slave in Halifax County, Va., married at 15 years old, widowed at age 22 in Caswell County, N.C., married again at age 23, hauled into Court at age 54 for providing the age old service of Midwife to countless women in Caswell County. She spent the rest of her life in Caswell County, with her dignity restored by a sympathetic Judge, who understood her vital role to mothers facing the dangerous time of childbirth everywhere.

She is buried at Macedonia A.M.E. Church 4164 Yarborough's Mill Rd. (SR-1554) about 1/2 mile west of Hwy 57.

Henrietta was brought to trial in Caswell County, North Carolina, in December of 1911, charged with practicing medicine without a license.

The Trial of Henrietta Phelps Jeffries, Caswell County, North Carolina

Still another illustration of the sympathetic relationship that has existed between the races in Caswell County is found in the files of the Caswell County Historical Association, Inc. The account is typed but unsigned, and the facts related in that source are substantially as follows: At the December, 1911, term of Superior Court in Caswell County a case of unusual interest was scheduled for trial. A true bill had been found by the Grand Jury on an indictment of an old black woman named Henrietta Jeffries charged with practicing medicine without a license. The case had been widely discussed in the county and when the case was called the courtroom was filled to capacity.

Judge Charles M. Cooke was presiding and the solicitor or state prosecutor was S. P. Graves. The state carefully picked its jury, but when the defendant was asked if she was satisfied with the jury she replied: "If the Judge has no fault with the jury, it suits me all right." The solicitor then began the usual questions: "Are you ready for trial?" "Yes, I'se ready." "Are you guilty or not guilty?" "I don't know zackly what you mean by that, but if you mean that I helped these white women when they needed me the most, the I'se guilty." As she said this Judge Cooke became quite interested. A tear glistened in his eye, and his old wrinkled face took on a glow. It was evident that she had the judge's sympathy. He looked at her for a moment, and he realized that she was "an old granny woman" and a midwife of the old school. Then he asked: "Aunt Henrietta, who is your lawyer? You'll need one." In her childish way, and with a faith that was beautiful to behold, she said: "Judge, I'se got no lawyer, but you am Judge and I'se depending on nobody but you." Judge Cooke, as if manifestly affected, said in a husky voice: "You have done chose the right lawyer this time."

Then came the unfolding of one of the most gripping stories in the history of Caswell County jurisprudence. A witness to the event said that it was as if Charles Dickens had come to life in the crowded courtroom and was telling one of his best stories.

Judge Cooke had taken the case in hand, and he began to develop it in a masterful way. He inquired of Aunt Henrietta: "How many children have you got?" She said: "I've been the mother of 18 children." Then the kindly judge interrupted her by saying: "Yes, eighteen times you went down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death and came back with a living soul. And God bless your black heart."

"And they say you have been practicing medicine without a license. Is it true?" "No, Jedge, I have not been practising medicine. I only went to those white women when they needed me. When they were in pain, I held their hands, and I was the first to love their little children when dey come into this world." It was then the judge told her: "Aunt Henrietta, my mother had 12 children, and an old midwife like you was at the borning of them all. No, Aunt Henrietta, they sha'n't do a thing with you. I am gong to send you back to your humble home. You have given a wonderful service to Caswell County, more than you realize and when you have gone the people will say of you, as they honor your memory, 'well done thou good and faithful servant.'"

It was at this point that Solicitor Graves sprang to his feet and said: "Your honor, I must protest. Some of the women to whom she gave service developed childbed fever and died." Judge Cooke, with a merry twinkle in his eye, replied: "Well, Mr. Solicitor, I specks that is true, but I'll bet my bottom dollar that a heap more of them died who the doctors went to see."

Sitting near the judge in the witness chair, Henrietta Jeffries waited. The judge continued: "Aunt Henrietta, it looks like it's going to be bad weather. I speck it will snow or sleet tonight, if the night is bad and it snows, the snow will fall around your humble cabin. Or maybe the sleet will beat on the roof. And just when you get warm in bed you'll hear a knocking at the door, and you'll say 'Who dar?' And the voice will come to you through the storm, 'Mrs. Smith is might sick and she wants you to come to her at once.' What would you do, Aunt Henrietta?"

"Judge, I would get up and go."

"Yes," said the Judge, "I know you would. I can see you now as you pulled to your bedside with your cane, your old ragged socks, and fastening your shawl about you, then get up behind the messenger and ride away into the night on your mission, and may God bless you, and He will."

"Now there is one thing I would warn you from doing. You must not give any of those women to whom you are called any medicine. You don't know anything about the actions of drugs. Now I don't mean that you shouldn't give them some

turpentine and ditney tea, for these are about the best medicines in the world."

"I want to shake your hand, Aunt Henrietta So good-bye, and God spare you long to bless humankind."

Then Judge Cooke turned to the clerk and said: "Mr. Clerk, take this judgement: 'In the case of State vs. Henrietta Jeffries,' the defendant is not guilty."

Source: *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 534-537.

I'd like to provide some information about Henrietta and her family, as I had researched her in the past, since she shares the same surname as myself, Phelps.

As most know, many slaves were given the surname of their owners, and I feel strongly that I can indentify Henrietta's father, Elijah Phelps and his owner, Reuben Phelps d. 1837, Halifax County Virginia (my 3rd Great-Granduncle). Reuben Phelps was a son of James Phelps d.1786, Caswell County NC. Reuben removed to Halifax Co Va and died there. On January 22nd, 1803, Thomas Phelps (Reuben's brother) of Caswell County, N.C. sold to Reuben Phelps of Halifax County, Va., 100 acres of land in Halifax County, Va. (Deed Book 19-- Page 435).

Reuben left a Will in Halifax Co Va. and named slaves that he bequested in his Will, written January 4th, 1837 and probated May 22, 1837. Below are excerpts from his Will.

First-- I give to my loving Son, Isham Phelps a certain parcel of land to be taken off my tract of land lying on the North side my Spring branch, beginning at the corner poplar Stump between me and William Ervin and to run up the Spring branch to a large red Oak near my spring, then a straight line to a large Mulberry on the line near Rebecca Preston's. to have and to hold during his natural life, but if he should die without a lawful heir, my will is that said land shall belong to my grand Son, Levi Phelps.

Secondly-- My will is that the balance of my land shall belong to my four daughters Viz., Delpha Phelps, Sarah Phelps, Martha Phelps and Rachel Phelps, to live upon & have during their natural life and if either of them should die without a lawful heir, the rest to have the said land and if they all should die without a lawful heir my will is that said land shall belong to my my grand Son, Reuben M. Phelps.

Fourthly-- My will is that Delpha Phelps shall have a Negroe boy **Hiland**, during her natural life and if she should die without a lawful heir said Negroe to belong to the balance of my surviving children.

Fifthly-- My will is that my daughter Sarah Phelps shall have a Negroe girl **Fanny** to have during her natural life, but if she should die without a lawful heir, said Negroe to go to my surviving children.

Sixthly-- My will is that my daughter Martha Phelps shall have a Negroe boy **Dennis**, to have during her natural life, but if she should die without a lawful heir, said Negroe to go to my surviving children.

Seventhly-- My will is that my daughter Rachel Phelps shall have a Negroe boy **Elijah**, to have during her natural life, but if she should die without a lawful heir, said Negroe to go to my surviving children.

Eighthly-- My will is that my other three Negroes Viz., **Lucy and her child Henry and Fanny's child Caroline**, shall stay with my children on the Plantation during their natural lives.

Martha Phelps, daughter of Reuben Phelps, who was willed the negroe boy **Dennis**, was listed in the 1850 Slave Schedule in Halifax County, Virginia with 17 Slaves. Her sister Rachel, who was willed the negroe boy **Elijah**, was living with Martha. Neither Martha or Rachel ever married, they lived together the rest of their lives and died in Halifax Co. Va.

Martha Phelps must have been a shrewd, business minded woman as she purchased her deceased father's assets from several of the Devisees of her father's Will. As you will see she seems to do this to preserve her father's assets until her death, and then to return these assets to the same people in her Will. Martha and her sister Rachel appear to have never married and are listed in later Census records living together at advanced ages with their surnames still being listed as Phelps. Martha Phelps made purchases of Property and of right, title and interest in her father Reuben Phelps Sr.'s Estate.

Reuben M. Phelps, grandson of Reuben Phelps d.1837, also lived in Caswell County from the Census of 1860 onwards.

The emancipated Phelps slaves probably came from Martha Phelps and her family in Halifax Co. Va.

Reuben Phelps' son, Isham Phelps, came back to Caswell County and lived and died in the Milton area of Caswell County. He purchased two tracts of land in 1831 and 1832 from his Uncle Thomas Phelps (my 3rd Great-Grandfather). Others of Reuben's family were in Caswell Co after his death.

The following black Phelps named in Reuben Phelps last will, show up in Caswell County as well, in the Milton Township. This was after Emancipation and the first Census that would have listed former slaves. They do not appear in Halifax Co Va. during these years, although their former owners, Rachel Phelps (**Elijah**) and Martha Phelps (**Dennis**), are listed in Halifax Co Va in the 1870 Census and later ones as well

Henrietta Phelps appears in the 1870 Caswell County Census in the household of **Elijah Phelps** age 45 black male Farmer born Va.. Henrietta is listed as age 15 black female born Va. House Servant. Henrietta Phelps Jeffries named Elijah Phelps as her father born Va. on her 1926 death certificate.

Residence # 174

Elija Phelps age 45 black male Farmer born Va
Ann Phelps (**Charlotte A. Phelps**) age 45 black female Keeping House born Va.
Pinkney Phelps age 17 black male Farm Laborer born Va.
Henrietta Phelps age 15 black female House Servant born Va.
James Phelps age 11 black male At Home born Va.
Smith Phelps (**Elijah S. Phelps**) age 9 black male At Home born Va.
Cornelia Phelps age 7 black female At Home born Va.
Elizabeth Phelps age 5 black female At Home born Va.

Residence #177

George Lawson age 56 black male Farm Laborer born NC
William Lawson age 22 black male Farm Laborer born NC (Henrietta's future 1st husband) He died between 1872 and 1880 as Henrietta Lawson is shown as Widowed in the 1880 Census in Milton, Caswell County.

Residence #178

Dennis Phelps appears in the 1870 Caswell County Census in the household of John Owen. Dennis Phelps age 50 black male Farm Laborer born Va., living only four households away from Elijah Phelps. Dennis appears again in the 1880 Census of Caswell.

H.J. Phelps (**Lucy and her child Henry**) appears in the 1880 Caswell Census--black male--age 45--born Va.
Caswell County Marriages

*Henry J. Phelps (son of Robin and **LUCY** Lewis) m. Lucy Wilson (dau. of Mike and Lucindy Wilson) 13 Oct. 1867 md. by N.M. Lewis, JP

Henrietta Phelps appears in the Caswell 1880 Census as Henrietta Lawson

Dwelling# 229

Henrietta Lawson-- Mulatto female--age 22--keeping house--Widowed--
George Lawson Jr- Son--Black male—age 7

Dwelling# 230

Charlotte Phelps--Mulatto female—age 34—domestic servant--Widowed
James Phelps--Son--Mulatto male—age 17
Elijah Phelps—Son--Mulatto Male—age 16
Cornelia Phelps--Daughter—Mulatto Female—age 15?

Dwelling # 231

George Lawson—Black male—age 68--Farmer--widowed

Caswell County Marriages

William Lawson m. Henrietta Phelps-- marriage date:21 Jan 1872

Marriage Place:Milton, Caswell, North Carolina

Grooms Parents: George and Mary Lawson

Brides Parents: Elijah and Charlotte Phelps

Henrietta Phelps Lawson Jeffries named Charlotte Bennett born NC as her mother on her 1926 Death Certificate.

The Charlotte Phelps living next to Henrietta in the 1880 Census, 34 yrs old must be her mother, although the age may be incorrect as she would have been 12years old when Henrietta was born, which is possible as my 2nd great grandmother, married when she was 14 and had 14 children. I feel her correct age is 54, which coincides perfectly wyth the Charlotte A. Phelps listed in the 1900 Census age 74 below and the Ann (Charlotte Ann) listed in the 1870 Census age 45. All these dates fit a birth year for Charlotte of 1825/26.Henietta's siblings James, Elijah & Cornelia are living with Charlotte, who is shown as Widowed. Henrietta's father-in-law George Lawson lives in the very next household.

The below family is shown as “Philps” in familysearch.org census records.

1900 Census

Milton Township, Senora Precinct, Caswell, North Carolina

Residence# 178

John H Phelps--age28--Head--Male—black—b.Jan 1872

Willie Phelps—age 24--Wife—Female—black--b. Jan 1876

Abner Phelps—age 7--Son—Male—black—b. Nov 1892

Mary Phelps—age 5--Daughter—Female—black--b. Apr 1895

John Phelps—age 3--Son—Male--black--b. Apr 1897
Allen Phelps—age 1--Son--Male—black--b. Oct 1898

Charlotte A. Phelps—age 74—Mother—Female--black--b. Mar 1826, Va—
Midwife—Widowed--Number of Children: 11-- Number Living Children:7
Elijah S. Phelps—age 38—Son--Male —black—b. Feb 1862, Va—Farmer

It appears that Henrietta learned her Midwife skills from her mother. Henrietta named a daughter Charlotte A. Jeffreys in the 1900 Census.

Henrietta Phelps Lawson next married Allen Jeffreys

Caswell County Marriages
Marriage Date July 30 1881
Allen Jeffreys Age 22 born 1859 Black
Groom's Parents: Tom and Diannah Jeffreys

Henrietta Lawson Age 23 born 1858 Black
Bride's Parents: Elijah and Charlotte Phelps

It appears that Henrietta learned her Midwife skills from her mother.
Charlotte A. Phelps stated on the 1900 Census that she had 7 living children. I contend these 7 children are:

- 1-Daniel
- 2-Abner
- 3-Pinkney
- 4-Henrietta
- 5-James
- 6-Elijah S.
- 7-John H.

In the records below are the 6 remaining living children other than Henrietta.

Daniel Phelps (another older brother of Henrietta's) appears in the Caswell Co Census from 1880 thru 1910

Daniel Phelps married Melvina Garland, October 16 1873 in Milton Township, Caswell County. Daniel age 22, Melvina age 23.
Groom's Parents: Elija and Charlotte Phelps.
Bride's Parents: Ned (Nelson) and ? Garland

Daniel died February 7, 1917 in Caswell County according to his death certificate. He listed his father as Elija Phelps. His birthdate is June 6, 1846. Occupation: Shoemaker Burial: New Zion Church, Danville Va.

Abner Phelps (brother of Henrietta) married Leanna Garland April 16, 1873
Caswell County--
Groom's Parents: Father: ? Mother: Charlotte A. Phelps
Bride's Parents: Henry and Milly Garland

Pinkney Phelps (Henrietta's older brother) appears in the 1880 Census of
Caswell County.

Pinkney Phelps—age 29—Mulatto male—Works in Tobacco Factory
Celia Phelps—Wife--age 22—Black Female--Laundress
Maggie Phelps—Daughter--age 2—Mulatto Female

Pinkney Phelps married Sealey Henderson, March 15 1877 Caswell Co.
Groom's Parents: Elija and Charlotte Phelps
Bride's Parents: George and Luvenia Henderson
Pinkney 23 and Sealey 19 years of age

James Phelps (another brother of Henrietta's) appears in the 1900 and 1910
Census of Caswell County. In 1910 he is living directly adjacent to Henrietta and
Allen Jeffreys.

Caswell County 1910 Census Milton Township
Household# 152
James Phelps—age 54—Black male—Farmer--born Va.
Minerva Phelps—Wife--age 42—Black female—born NC.
James A. Phelps—Son--age 21—Black male
Henry Phelps—Son--age 18—Black male
Sarah J. Phelps—Daughter--age 16—Black female
Lena S. Phelps—Daughter--age 13--Black female
Celia Phelps—Daughter--age 12—Black female
Hillory Phelps—Son--age 8—Black male
Arthur G. Phelps—Son—age 15—Black male

James Phelps married Minerva Steward(Stewart) November 19, 1885 in Caswell
County
Groom's Parents: E. Phelps and Q.? Phelps.
Bride's Parents: John and Sarah Steward.

Elijah S. (Smith) Phelps (brother of Henrietta) Death Certificate: born
1861—burial date April 15, 1937—age 76—colored male—Single--Farmer--born
NC—Father:Elija Phelps Mother: Charlotte Bennett

John H. (Henry) Phelps (brother of Henrietta) Death Certificate: born Jan 16 1871 Caswell County—burial date November 5, 1944, Macedonia Church, Caswell County—age 73—married:spouse Willie Phelps—Father: Elija Phelps Mother: Charlotte Shelton. John Henry Phelps' wife was Willie Cunningham, daughter of James Cunningham and Mary Yarbrough

I welcome any comments, corrections and critique of this article. My conclusions are based on the best information I have found at the time of this writing. There are still some unanswered questions.

The Charlotte A. Phelps (mother of Henrietta) shown as Ann Phelps, age 45 in the 1870 Census, the Charlotte Phelps age 34 in the 1880 Census, and the Charlotte A. Phelps, age 74 in the 1900 Census. All ages would indicate a birthdate of ca.1826, if the 1880 Census age is in fact incorrect. If her age is corrected to 54 in 1880, it puts her birth 1826, and her age 74 in 1900 to coincide with her age 45 in 1870.

There is a Charlotte Ann Shelton Harris Phelps (b. Mar 1826 - d.) buried at Macedonia A.M.E. Church in Caswell County, the same Cemetery that is Henrietta's final resting place. This would be the Charlotte A. (Anne) Phelps born 1826. Strange that no death date is listed.

Elijah S. Phelps gives his mother's name as Charlotte Bennett, his brother John H. Phelps gives his mother as Charlotte Shelton. Elijah S. Phelps and John H. Phelps are brothers. as shown in later Census records.

Other Phelps buried here are:

1. Phelps, Allen (b. 23 Oct 1898 - d. 20 Mar 1987)
aka Babe Phelps
2. Phelps, Andrew (b. 1873 - d. 13 Jan 1949)
3. Phelps, Celia Henderson (b. abt 1858 - d. 8 Apr 1918)
aka Sealy Phelps
4. Phelps, Charlotte Ann Shelton Harris (b. Mar 1826 - d.)
5. Phelps, Clarence (b. 23 Sep 1908 - d. 2 Jan 1950)
6. Phelps, Elizabeth (b. abt 1865 - d. 13 Apr 1937)
7. Phelps, James Wilson, Jr. (b. 1 May 1889 - d. 5 Nov 1918)
8. Phelps, John Henry (b. 16 Jan 1871 - d. 1 Nov 1944)
9. Phelps, Minerva (b. 1866 - d. 1911)
wife of James Phelps
10. Phelps, Minerva Stewart (b. Jan 1868 - d. 1911)
11. Phelps, Morris (b. 27 Aug 1924 - d. 17 Oct 1987)
12. Phelps, Ruby Womack (b. 28 Oct 1904 - d. abt 1991)
13. Phelps, Unnamed (b. 17 Dec 1931 - d. 17 Dec 1931)

14. Phelps, Willie (b. 14 Feb 1876 - d. 27 Jul 1950)
15. Phelps, Willie Yarborough (b. 25 Jan 1876 - d. 26 Jul 1950)

Willie and Minerva seem to be double entries on this list.

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Sources: *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County North Carolina 1777-1977*, William S. Powell (1977) at 534-537.

Caswell County N.C Census Records via Familysearch.org and Heritage Quest

The Will of Reuben Phelps d.1837, Halifax County Va.