

Jones, Marvin Tupper: Pleasant Plains ^[1]

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Marvin Tupper Jones: Pleasant Plains

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/8/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I recently joined Marvin Tupper Jones at his family's annual reunion and fish fry. We were in Pleasant Plains, part of an extraordinary, 9-mile-long swath of land in the state's rural, northeast corner that has been owned by people of color since before the Revolutionary War. Now a professional photographer in Washington, Jones is also the caretaker of the community's past, collecting and preserving its old stories, photographs and written records. We visited cemeteries, chatted with his family and neighbors, and explored Pleasant Plains and the nearby towns of Winton, Cofield and Ahoskie.

In Marvin Tupper Jones' words:

This land has always been owned by people of color. Whites never settled this land. You had a Meherrin Indian tribe here on Potecasi Creek. Then you had people of color free black people, Indians, whites, a lot of mixed-race people who ca

A lot of folks like to talk about this region in terms of our being light-skinned and kind of set apart. All right, I got two stories, and one is about my cousin, Mary Reid.

In 1831, Mary's great-grandfather was born to a slave and the slave's master. He didn't have any sons, but his slave we're talking about my great-great-grandmother she gave birth to a son, Richard Columbus Jones.

The slave's master was happy to have a son. He freed my great-great-grandmother and made the son his official son. He raised him as white. His father even picked out a wife for him. The wife's mother was from Ireland.

After the Civil War, there was a lot of bitterness for having lost the war and Reconstruction. People of color were taking roles in the state legislature, and black folks were voting. To white people, a lot of unsettling things were happening. Rich

At that time, people are looking for ways to undo you regardless of what color you are. If I can make this guy colored, I can get a better deal on his property. It's not race it's a matter of business.

So here's a man that was raised as white, but he is pushed out of the white community into the colored community. So a lot of his descendants, including Cousin Mary Reid, have red hair, blue eyes. And Mary's whiter than you.

Yet Mary and her family have always been considered "colored." One day, back in the '30s, in fact, Mary got on a bus in Cofield to go up north, and she was put back in the section for the colored.

This is my second story. Norfleet Chavis is a deacon at Phillipi church. He and his girlfriend, Vivian, decided to get a marriage license. This is in the late '60s. Norfleet has red hair, blue eyes, very white. Vivian is dark. They went into Winton t

She went in the back and told her boss, "There's a white man and black woman applying for a marriage license." Of course, that was a no-no. So the boss stuck his head out the door, came back and told her, "Go ahead. That's Clarence Cha

There's another thing that set us apart: It's accomplishment. Historically, we owned businesses that whites didn't have, like our Uncle Sam had a grist mill. We had the only record store in Ahoskie, the only dry cleaners in Winton. It was not ur

When they stopped letting colored people into the county fairgrounds, we made our own fairgrounds. It's a half-mile harness racing track. The fair is the Atlantic District Fair, and it's still held every year.

Where did the bricks for our oldest buildings come from? Our brick masons. Where did the wood come from? Our forests. They were cut in our sawmills.

The teachers even came from us. In 1866, we built our first schoolhouse, and most of the founders of Pleasant Plains church participated, including my father's great-grandfather. The bricks, the timber, all came from them.

Then, in 1886, Dr. Calvin Scott Brown, a graduate of Shaw University in Raleigh, founded Chowan Academy, later Waters Training School, later the C.S. Brown School, here in Winton.

C.S. Brown was a regional high school. Colored students came by train from Martin, Halifax, Bertie counties. You had them coming by boat up the Chowan. You had them coming in from Virginia. And the first group of teachers, some of the b

And they sent children into the outer world that became leaders at Tuskegee, Hampton, A&T, Shaw, Howard University and other institutions in black America, and we still do.

One last story. One of our church trustees, Georgia Hall Weaver, was managing her mother's landholdings, probably well over a thousand acres. They also owned land on Main Street in Ahoskie. This is 1956.

A discount department store named White's wanted to build a store on Main Street. They said, OK, we'll just buy this property from this little old colored woman and put our store there.

Georgia's response was, "We will rent you the property. We will build a building, and you will lease the building from us." She got Thomas Newsome -- my daddy dates his sister to this day -- to build the store. For 30 years, White's leased the

The interesting thing was, the store and the land were owned by a colored family, but up until 1964, we, colored people, were not allowed to go in there and eat. Our church member owned the building, but she herself could not go and sit dow

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