

## **Chavis, John** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Chavis, John**

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See also: [John Chavis on ANCHOR](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and [John Chavis for K-8 Students](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**ca. 1763–June 15, 1838**



Bust of John Chavis at Chavis Hall, Washington and Lee University. Image courtesy of Washington and Lee University.

John Chavis was a Black preacher, teacher, and Revolutionary War soldier. He was also the first [documented](#) <sup>[4]</sup> Black person to attend college in the United States. His parents were Jacob Chavis (1736-1808) and Elizabeth Evans (1745-1818) of Lunenburg County (now Mecklenburg County), Virginia. Chavis was named as a son of the couple through the May 22, 1787 Mecklenburg County will of his grandfather Thomas Evans. Little is known of Chavis's early years. Chavis's birth year is estimated, but a date is unknown. A certificate from November 8, 1802, acknowledged that Chavis was a free, Black man and was forty years of age. This indicated that his birth was in 1762 or 1763.

Chavis was likely documented later as a young boy. An "indentured servant named John Chavis" is mentioned in the inventory of the estate of [Halifax](#) <sup>[5]</sup> attorney [James Milner](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in 1773.

Chavis also served as a Patriot soldier in the [Revolutionary War](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. He enlisted in December 1778 in the Fifth Virginia Regiment and served for three years. Captain Mayo Carington certified Chavis's service in a bounty warrant written in March 1783. Carington stated that Chavis "faithfully fulfilled [his duties] and is thereby entitled to all immunities granted to three year soldiers."

Chavis continued to live in Virginia after the Revolution. He was listed in a 1789 tax list of Mecklenburg County, Virginia. He was documented as a free Black man whose property consisted of a single horse. In the same year, he was employed by Robert Greenwood's estate as tutor to Greenwood's orphans.

In 1788 and 1789, Chavis also studied at Princeton as a private student of Dr. John Witherspoon, then president of the college. Chavis is documented in the September 26, 1792, recommendation of the Reverend John Blair Smith, recorded in the minutes of the trustees of Princeton University. The recommendation stated that "Mr. John Todd Henry of Virginia and John Chavis, a free black man of that state . . . be received" on the [Leslie Fund](#) <sup>[8]</sup>. Chavis likely attended private ministry classes at Princeton instructed by Witherspoon.

Chavis attended the Presbyterian Washington Academy, now [Washington and Lee University](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. He was admitted to Washington and Lee University in 1799. A certificate issued in Rockbridge County, Virginia, on April 6, 1802, attested that John Chavis was known to the court and considered a free man and that "he has been a student at Washington Academy where he went through a regular course of Academical studies." Chavis was the first Black person in the United States documented to have attended a college.

On October 19, 1799, Chavis requested from the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia a license as a preacher. It was granted on November 19, 1800, and stated

"The said Jon Chavis [was voted a license] to preach the Gospel of Christ as a probationer for the holy ministry within the bounds of

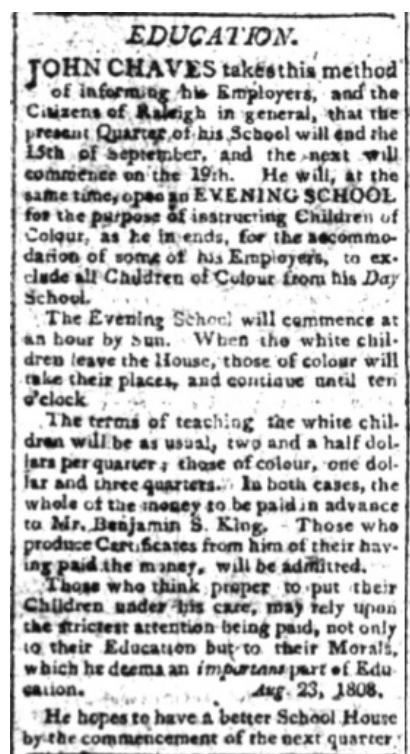
this Presbytery, or wherever he shall be orderly called, hoping as he is a man of colour, he may be peculiarly useful to those of his own complexion."

Six months later, at his own request, he was transferred to the Hanover Presbytery, recommended by the Lexington Presbytery "as a man of exemplary piety, and possessed of many qualifications which merit their respectful attention."

From 1801 to 1807, Chavis served the General Assembly of the [Presbyterian Church](#) <sup>[10]</sup> as a paid missionary to enslaved people in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Many of Chavis's reports of the religious conditions in places he visited, indicating the number of people in attendance at meetings he held, appear in the [Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church](#) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Chavis preached to both Black and white congregations. He preached to and moved freely among white Presbyterians and both enslaved and freed Black congregations.

Chavis relocated to Raleigh in 1807 or 1808. There, the Orange Presbytery, which included Raleigh, accepted him as a licentiate in 1809. Chavis preached until 1832. The [Nat Turner Rebellion](#) <sup>[12]</sup> of 1831 stoked fears of Black insurrection to abolish enslavement. As a result, white legislatures in Virginia and North Carolina restricted Black preachers from preaching. To support Chavis, the presbytery gave him fifty dollars a year beginning in 1834 until his death in 1838.



Chavis's August 25, 1808 ad for his school. Image courtesy of DigitalNC.org. <sup>[13]</sup>Chavis was married. His spouse was likely named [Frances](#) <sup>[14]</sup>. The 1840 Granville County census lists a "Fanny Chavis, female, free colored, aged 36-55." Other primary resources from the Orange Presbytery documented their relationship. The Presbytery assumed responsibility for the care of Chavis and his wife later in their lives. Frances was aided by the Presbytery, like Chavis, until April 1842. By 1842, it was reported that she was residing with friends and no longer needed aid. No children are known to have been born to Chavis and Frances/Fanny.

Chavis is also known for his career as an educator. His career began in [Raleigh](#) <sup>[15]</sup> as early as 1808. Chavis published ads in the [Raleigh Register](#) on [August 25](#) <sup>[13]</sup> and [September 1](#) <sup>[16]</sup> of 1808 that announced the opening of his school with a dual plan of organization. White students would attend during the day and Black students would attend in the evening until ten o'clock. For twenty-five years, Chavis taught in several counties, including Wake, Granville, and Chatham. Parents and peers documented Chavis as a "good Latin and a fair Greek scholar."

In September 1833, in an effort to earn money, Chavis sent the presbytery "An Essay on the Atonement" and asked for help in publishing it. With or without the presbytery's assistance, the essay was published under the title [Chavis' Letter upon the Doctrine of the Atonement of Christ](#) <sup>[17]</sup> (Raleigh, 1837).

Chavis died on June 15, 1838. His death date was documented in the July 26, 1838 edition of the [Watchman of the South](#) paper in Richmond, Virginia. The location and conditions of Chavis's death are not properly known. Chavis died in [Wake](#) <sup>[18]</sup>, [Orange](#) <sup>[19]</sup>, or [Granville County](#) <sup>[20]</sup>. Chavis lived in Wake County as late as 1835 according to residential records. Published obituaries from [Watchman of the South](#) and another Presbyterian paper in Richmond reported his place of death as Orange County. A much later obituary in the September 28, 1880 [Oxford Torchlight](#) (Oxford, NC) reported that Chavis had died "at his residence between Oxford and Williamsboro" in Granville County. Chavis's grave is not properly known. Some sources agree that he is likely buried on the grounds of Willie P. Mangum's former [Rougemont](#) <sup>[21]</sup> Plantation in Durham County.

Chavis's life is also recognized with parks and art exhibits. Chavis Park in Raleigh, named in his honor, is located near the site of his former school. On March 18, 1938, The Negro Citizen's Committee of Raleigh (today's Raleigh-Wake Citizen's Association) [petitioned](#) <sup>[22]</sup> the city to name the park for John Chavis. [John Chavis Memorial Park: Past to Present](#) is an outdoor exhibit about his life. The exhibit features stories from people who were impacted by the development of the park. In 1939, Chavis Heights was opened across the street from the park and it offered segregated public housing for Black Americans. The park serves as an example of Black history and culture in North Carolina. In 2016, the John Chavis Memorial Park was designated to the National Register of Historic Places.

## Educator Resources:

Grades K-8: John Chavis, K-8 Article, <https://www.ncpedia.org/john-chavis-k-8> [3]

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Parramore, Barbara M. [45]

**Origin - location:**

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