

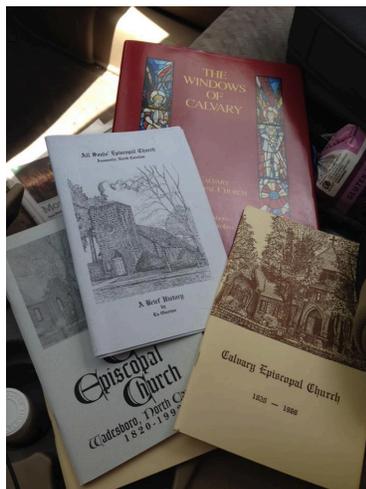
## **My Ancestors Are Many Things: Enslavers of African People, Irish Immigrants, Confederate Soldiers, Civil Rights Activists**

My ancestors' connections to slavery and the Civil War is the focus of this story, though I say it in context: We are many things, but often act as though we are only one. In order for this country to move forward, we must name and work through those multiple identities, good, bad, and everything in between. In working with Selma's "Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation" process, this history feels like it has something to offer, some part to play.

I wrote some of this family history around the 4th of July, as it made me think about my ancestors. Ancestors I recently discovered fought in the Revolutionary War, and Civil War. Ancestors that enslaved Black people, and some who fought for the Confederacy, though some apparently for the Union as well. I was honestly somewhat shocked by this, because three of my four grandparents had long roots in the North, but maybe that's just willful ignorance on my part about what it means to also have roots in the South. But it seems important to complicate my own view on that gushing, red-white-and-blue holiday of ours in July, as well as towards questions like whose independence my ancestors were *not* fighting for in the 1770s, and whose independence some of them fought *against* in the 1860s. If you take this as a simple pot shot at the 4th of July or the U.S., that'd be exactly that, simplistic. As the late Jimmy Boggs of Marion Junction, AL and Detroit, MI long held, I love my country enough to critique it.

In May of this year, I traveled to Wadesboro, NC, the hometown of my Great Grandfather, Osborne Bennett (O.B.) Hardison, Sr. (pictured at right) I discovered some of the heavy stuff I just mentioned,

including the fact that I had a Great, Great, Great Grandfather that fought in the Confederacy ("Thomas Jefferson Hardison," if you can believe it), and ancestors from him on back that enslaved people of African descent for at least a few generations. I don't throw this out here lightly. But as I've grappled with



questions like "What does it mean to be white?" and gotten deeper into learning where I came from overseas--Ireland,

France, the Netherlands, Scotland, England--I've wondered about my local roots as well: Canada, Michigan, New York, Virginia, and Wadesboro, North Carolina.



The night before I drove down to Wadesboro, my girlfriend asked me, "What do you plan to do when you get there?" A natural enough question, but in thinking about it, I had to admit, "Well, I guess I'm not sure." I had found out that my Great, Great Aunt

had written a brief history of Calvary Episcopal Church in Wadesboro, where my ancestors were

members for generations. I'd planned to go to one of the nearby college libraries to check the little book out, but my Aunt thankfully suggested I see if the church had a copy. So I called up the church. They put me through to a Father Tim, who said they not only had one, they'd give me one! So I had to take him up on his offer to stop in to chat.

I drove the two hours from Durham to Wadesboro, winding through small towns and lush farmland, leaving me time to wonder what I'd come across when I arrived. I stopped first to talk with Fr. Tim. He welcomed me in and showed me around the old antebellum church, giving me a copy of my distant Aunt Harriet's brief history of the church. My Great Grandfather who I mentioned, O.B. Hardison, Sr.,

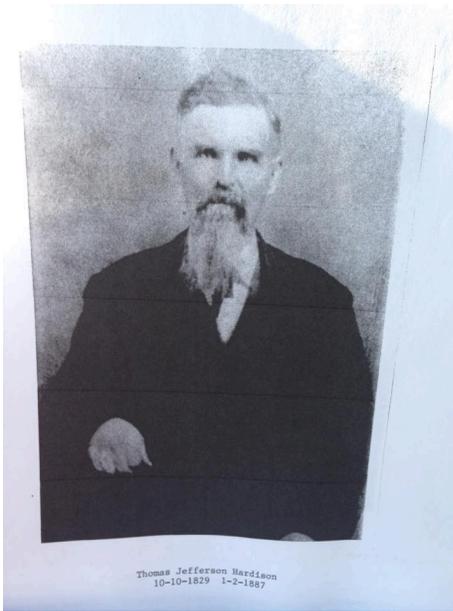


was in WWI and WWII, actually advancing to the

level of a decorated Admiral in the Navy--the type of position Fr. Tim hinted was often reserved for a wealthier, connected class (I don't know if that was definitely the case, but it seems plausible, though I believe my Great Grandfather O.B. showed serious valor either way—receiving the Navy Cross, the second highest military award). After a helpful conversation and a tour, complete with old, shadowy stain-glassed windows that were dedicated to various relatives of mine—most, like these Bennetts at left, I had never heard of—Fr. Tim suggested I walk a few doors down to the Wadesboro Historical Society.

Standing on the steps of the Historical Society, I couldn't believe it: I arrived just after it had closed—I knocked anyways. Maybe my ancestors were with me in some strange kind of way, because an eager Historical Society employee named Steve Bailey kindly ushered me in, going on to spend an hour-and-a-half or better with me. He pulled open long drawers from extensive file cabinets, eventually uncovering a manila folder and a three-ring binder: "Hardison family," they both read. Still surprised at my fortune, I began looking through them, attempting to interpret some cryptic, text-based version of a family tree. Then I turned to the three-ring binder. A few pages in, a black and white picture of a somber man wearing a chest-length beard stared back at me, with those same "hollow ancient eyes" John Prine sings about. I did a double take as I read his name: Thomas Jefferson Hardison.

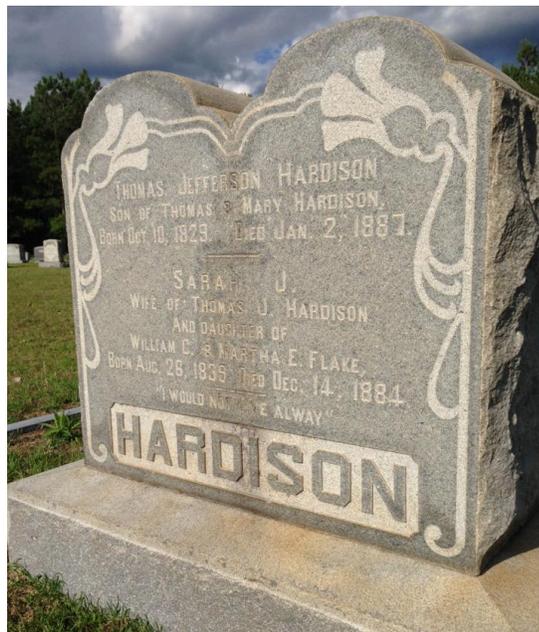




The next page answered much of what I had been wondering for a long time: an ancestor of mine was a soldier in the Confederacy. One side of this I feel particularly close to is that he enlisted at 35, the same age I am right now. His involvement appeared short-lived, enlisting in the fall of 1864, captured soon after in Dec. of 1864 in Savannah, GA--he had traveled there by train to resist Gen. Sherman's infamous "March to the Sea."

The description of then-prisoner Thomas Jefferson Hardison at Fort Delaware matched his picture: "Complexion dark, hair dark, eyes grey, height 6 ft. 2 in." After signing an "oath of allegiance" to the United States in June of 1865, he "made his way home on foot in a ragged uniform" and around Philadelphia was "set upon and his ear was cut by a bottle thrown at him." He lived for another 22 years, dying in Jan. of 1887, as shown on his

headstone I found below.



To be honest, part of me wants to set upon him myself, *beating* him out of my past. "What the hell were you doing?!" I'd yell as I laid into him. But that is not history. And the story doesn't end there.

It wasn't until a week or so later, back at my home in Selma, that I started looking through the rest of the documents from Wadesboro. My gut knew before my eyes worked through the text that there was more. A sort of unease *set in* at my gut.

I began turning pages through old wills. My mind searched the words but didn't want to fully see any of it. But a part of me knew it was time. Time enough to receive the complexity of all this--if for no other reason than to better wrap my mind and spirit around that too-vague inheritance of whiteness. So in their wills, my ancestors—multiple of them—passed down people, people with hearts and souls and families. Enslaved people from Africa—Black people—alongside property, land, f\*\*\*ng farm implements.

I accept that there is a bizarre, cognitive dissonance that happens as I react to these things. Part of me is acutely ready to yell. Part of me is aware of myself in that state, and aware that I want to avoid anything performative here, or overly individualistic. It is not about that. Or maybe it partly is, but it is definitely about more than simply that.

And so I swallow all this, ingest it as mine. Like a foul piece of meat that I no longer have the choice whether to swallow or not. It is in me. Again, I have no interest in melodrama, but I also have every interest in sitting with this over years, having it seep into my heart, soul, body—my sense of my place in what Paulo Coelho calls the “universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected.” Not all those connections are worth celebrating, for some are forged from hate and domination.

Based on the 1860 Census, around 32 [percent of white Southerners enslaved black people](#). That number [rose as high as 49 percent in Alabama, dropping down to 28 percent in NC](#)--placing my ancestors among a fairly elite group of white Southerners in NC, in terms of power, wealth, and dehumanization. That wealth does not disappear from one generation to the next; even if I grew up in a lower-middle class family of five, I am curious about the traces of it in my life, the life of my family.

The furthest back these documents go includes a "Jasper Hardison," the oldest known Hardison ancestor. He is said to have come to Eastern NC in 1720, “direct from England or [he] sailed down from Maine.” He purchased 100 acres for 14 pounds, then in 1729 purchased a plantation for some unstated amount of money from Cullen Pollock, son of the Royal Governor Pollock. The next year that same governor decided to grant that same Jasper Hardison 640 acres (read: he was given some version of a land grant, [which over history have overwhelmingly been given to white men](#)). That wealth traveled like a weight through history from Jasper to his son John, John to Benjamin, Benjamin to Thomas, and then on to his son: Thomas Jefferson Hardison.

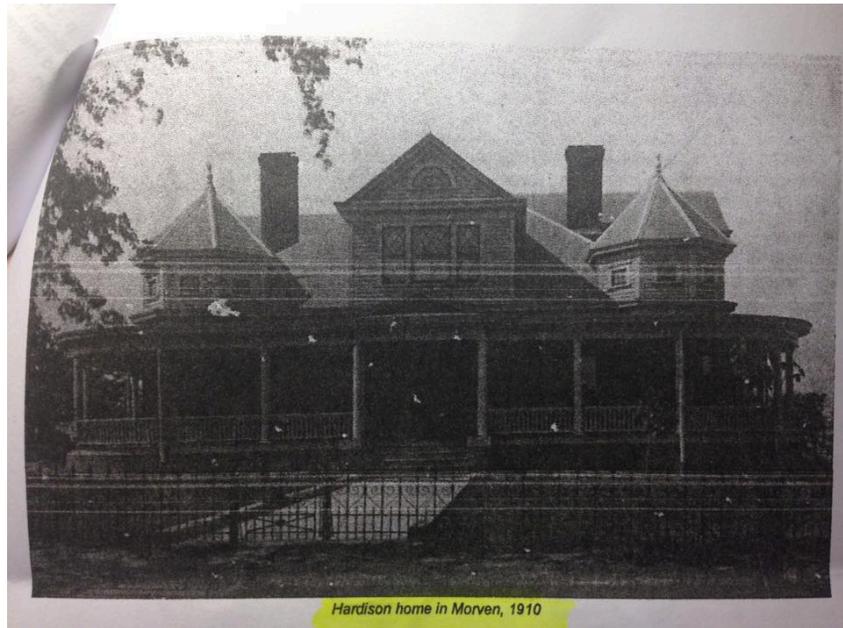
From Jasper to John, it included all 640 acres, according to Jasper’s will. [John was apparently among the delegates who made NC “the first of the colonial governments to call for total independence,”](#) in April of 1776—three months before the Declaration of Independence—[via something called the “Halifax Resolves”](#)).

That inheritance of land then passed on to John's children, and with it, the Black people John enslaved. One recipient of both people and property was his son, Benjamin Hardison, who was apparently a soldier in the same Revolutionary War his father John supported. Was there any shred of sick irony in this? To fight for one’s freedom while stealing another’s? Never in the

emaciated history lessons of the Virginia public schools was I challenged to wonder at the deep contradictions in this--that ain't right, as they say. But I can do complexity, and swallow the significance of my ancestors' role in the Revolutionary War, but I can't do it without asking us to grow our idea of revolution to catch up with a shero of mine, Grace Lee Boggs (whose Marion Junction husband I mentioned above)--Grace calls us to see revolution as evolution into a more human way of being in the world. May it be so, for clearly it has not always been.

Wrapping up the generational story, Benjamin "passed on" (a cheap, insufficient phrase) some of his land and similarly, the Black people he enslaved, to his children. One son, Thomas, received land and people from his father; he was also willed 200 acres in 1842 from his father-in-law, and in the style of those sometimes-shrouded Southern intentions, the recounting of this says he "became a very successful planter." No doubt he had a plantation. And no doubt who really did all the planting--the tireless work, the amassing of still more wealth for my white ancestor, who just happened to be on that end of what is perhaps the second original sin of American life, that lie of a hierarchy of human value (following the original sin of the theft of land from Native Americans).

Then came his son, Thomas Jefferson Hardison, in 1829. He likely received a similar inheritance of land and people, though I couldn't find a will in that case. But he fought in the Confederacy and died in 1887 at his plantation, "Hardison Quarters." Additional documents I was sent by the Wadesboro Historical Society note he "had extensive land holdings" and "was [a] prosperous cotton planter."



Why did he fight in the Confederacy? And why did he join so late, in 1864? Maybe the answer to both is the same: all that land he owned, those people he enslaved, that wealth he was most likely given, and most surely took in the way of stolen labor--i.e., perhaps it all bought him the power to casually watch while others went off to fight for his right to enslave other people.

The Civil War is something I am still learning about, for sure, along with my own piece--my own inheritance, you could say--of this toxic history of white domination in America. That said, I and all of us would do well to remember the magnitude of loss across the country, with "more Americans [dying] than in World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined," [including over 100,000 in the North and almost 100,000 in the South](#) on the

battlefields ([over 620,000 total, including many who died by diseases](#)). But as the women's movement reminds us, the personal is political. Since I have felt that other white folks should upturn their ancestral stones and question their ancestors' old allegiances, I've known I must do the same.

And I know that complex thinking has a role here, for all history of European peoples or white folks in the US is not toxic—as I have found, for example, in my deep journey into my Irish roots. My family and I traveled there to learn about our Irish roots two years ago and fell in love with the people and their history of struggle, as the first colony in the British Empire ([around 1177, well before the Americas](#)). The searching history of Noel Ignatiev, appropriately titled “How the Irish became white,” speaks to the reality that whiteness is at once a social construct and a construct white people sold much of their identity to buy into. He also tells of how many Irish, such as the freedom fighter Daniel O’Connell, welcomed Frederick Douglas to their land when he came to build global constituencies for abolition. As just one more example, TJ Hardison’s Great Grandson—my Grandfather—OB Hardison, Jr., and my powerful Grandmother, Marifrancisc Hardison, marched in the Civil Rights Movement in their home of Chapel Hill in the ‘60s, and housed Vietnam War protesters on their living room floor in Washington, DC.

So perhaps it is appropriate I grew up in Virginia, a Southern state and crucial part of the Confederacy, but one that now occupies some uncertain middle ground between North and South. Indeed, I was born in Michigan into the O'Connor family, and my grandmother, who married into the Hardisons, is a Fitzgibbon from NY and Canada—both with long Irish roots, among other ancestors; but all of those Northern sides of me speak to more searching I may do one day into likely Union soldiers in my past (one, a John Clifford, who I know from an old, scribbled history, “fought in the Union Cavalry during the Civil War and went out West before 1870—[and was] never heard from”). But let’s complicate those lines, and remember Dr. King said he experienced the fiercest racism in the North (Chicago), and as discussed in the book “Gather at the Table,” one of the authors descends from the DeWolfs of Rhode Island, “the largest slave-trading dynasty in US history.”

In our conflicted land—itself the product of conquest and colonization—with many people from many places, perhaps complicated roots are a good reminder that we are many things. And a reminder that white folks like myself have both a damning and a rich, complicated cultural past that we would do well to research and remember—but we cannot get by on researching and remembering only one of those pasts, as many of us tend to do, we have to do the hard work of uncovering and understanding both. Only then can we fully understand and act on the resulting racial inequality that exists today, and other related implications of that fuller history. In that spirit, understanding and acting on our history is the work of the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation process in Selma, and in the other thirteen sites around the country.

**- Brendan O'Connor, Selma Center for Nonviolence, Truth & Reconciliation**