



## John Chavis, Black Educator

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article appeared in a History of North Carolina Education supplement to the Raleigh News and Observer in July, 1985..*

A more unusual Presbyterian minister and school master was John Chavis, a black man who taught in several North Carolina counties for 20 years.

John Chavis, probably the best-educated black man of the pre-Civil War era, was born about 1763 and died on June 15, 1838. He was a preacher and teacher for both blacks and whites in North Carolina from 1802 into the 1830s and is said to have been instrumental in the education of some of the state's leading men.

Little is definitely known of Chavis' early years. He was almost certainly the "indentured servant named John Chavis" mentioned in the inventory of the estate of Halifax lawyer James Milner in 1773. Milner, whose private library was one of the best in North Carolina, was closely connected with the Mangum, Willie and Jones families of Sussex County, Virginia. The Rev. William Willie of Sussex was beneficiary of the Greek and Latin volumes in Milner's estate and may have played a role in the early training of John Chavis after Milner's death.

Chavis enlisted in December, 1778 in the 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia Regiment and served for three years in the Revolutionary War. His commander certified in 1783 that Chavis had "faithfully fulfilled his duties and is thereby entitled to all immunities granted to three-year soldiers." He was listed as a free Negro in a 1789 tax list of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, his property consisting of a single horse. In the same year he was employed by Robert Greenwood's estate as tutor to Greenwood's orphans.

Chavis is believed to have attended Washington Academy, a Presbyterian institution which was the genesis of Washington and Lee University. A certificate made out in Rockbridge County, Virginia in 1802 attests that he was a free man and "also that he has been a student at Washington Academy where he went through a regular course of Academical studies." Recorded minutes of the trustees of Princeton University on September 26, 1792 contain a recommendation by the Rev. John Blair that "Mr. Todd Henry, a Virginian, and John Chavis, a free black man of that state, . . . be received" on the school's Leslie Fund. John Witherspoon, president of the college, conducted private classes for students studying for the ministry and probably taught Chavis in such sessions. That Chavis' education was exceptional for the time is apparent from his later writings, especially his correspondence with Willie P. Mangum, as well as from his professional activities.

Chavis was licensed in 1800 by the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia "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 a man of colour, he may be peculiarly useful to those of his own complexion."

From 1801 to 1807, Chavis was provided with a horse and funds for lodging and served the Presbyterians as a missionary to slaves in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. He wrote reports about the religious conditions in the places he visited and indicated the numbers in attendance at meetings he held. Not only was he a preacher to blacks but his services were attended by whites, among whom he moved freely.

Chavis located in Raleigh in 1807 or 1808 and was accepted as a licentiate in 1809 by the Orange Presbytery. Though never ordained, he preached until 1832 when, in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion, blacks were barred from preaching and Chavis was denied his primary source of livelihood. The Orange Presbytery set up a committee to help with the care of Chavis and his wife and they were apparently given \$50 a year from 1834 until Chavis death in 1838. Mrs. Chavis was aided until 1842 when it was reported that she was living with friends.

In North Carolina, Chavis is best known for his teaching. Through ads in the Raleigh Register in 1808, he announced the opening of a school with a dual plan of organization -- white students to attend during the day and black in the evening until ten o'clock; the former paying \$2.50 a quarter; the latter, \$1.75.

Chavis taught in Wake, Granville, Chatham and other counties for 20 years. He was known as a "good Latin and a fair Greek scholar." Prominent among the children believed to have studied under Chavis were members of the Mangum, Manly, Henderson, Horner, Enloe and Hargrove families, including Governor Charles Manly. White students were said to have boarded sometimes in the Chavis home in order to attend his school.

The friendship between Chavis and Senator Willie P. Mangum suggests a teacher-pupil relationship. For many years, Chavis wrote long and intimate letters to Mangum, often criticizing the senator's political positions. Chavis was opposed to the abolition of slavery. He admitted "that Slavery is a national evil . . . , but what is to be done? . . . make the best of a bad bargain." He felt great distaste for President Andrew Jackson and was opposed to the states-rights advocacy of Mangum and others. In 1837, he published "An Essay on the Atonement," though no copies are known to have survived.

The Oxford Torchlight of September 28, 1880 indicated that Chavis at the time of his death was living between Oxford and Williamsboro. The editor recalled having "seen him when a short time before his death several of his white pupils, prominent gentlemen, called to see him. Chavis was then advanced in years, his white hair forming a strange contrast to his ebony face for he was of unmixed African descent. His manners were dignified yet respectful and entirely unassuming and his conversation sprightly and interesting."

The only known obituary of his death appeared in a Richmond Presbyterian paper, which in June, 1838, reported his death in Orange County. Chavis had no known children. Chavis Park in Raleigh, named in his honor, is located near the site of the school he conducted there.