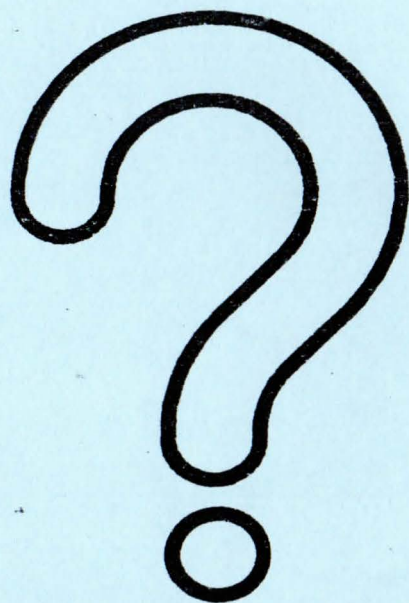


WHO WAS  
SOLOMON  
SAWYERS?



BY JOY LEWIS

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by Joy Lewis

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"[That was]," E.L. said, "the situation in my family and likewise in the Sawyers...I think they [had] white and Indian [ancestry]." In his recollection the Sawyer descendants were obviously "of the Indian family. Their hair and their temperament" seemed to indicate the heritage they boasted of.

Clarence Sawyer, grandson of Adam Sawyer one of Solomon and Tabitha's sons, was born in 1911. (Solomon's descendants eventually dropped the "s" from their surname. Solomon was known as "Sawyers." His name is so recorded on early census and land records, but by 1900 his widow, as well as his sons and grandsons had become known as "Sawyer.") Clarence never knew his great-grandparents, but he heard family tales from his father Dalton and an older cousin. "Si Revels told me [that Solomon] was a Mohawk Indian," Clarence remembered in 1993.

The Sawyer family's pride in their Indian heritage was well-known in the Stony Ridge community among both black and white residents. Granddaughters of Adam Sawyer, Clarence's sisters Jewel and Doris, often "mentioned the fact that Betsy [Elizabeth Pledge], daughter of Chief Donnaha, was in their family genealogy." Solomon and Tabitha's youngest daughter Jane was born in 1857. Jane married Bill Cundiff, a plantation relative of E.L. Cundiff. Their daughter Ida, born in 1892, said, "[I] knew from [my] mother that Solomon was an Indian."

### *Heritage of Solomon's Mother*

The connection that Solomon Sawyers claimed to Elizabeth Pledge bears investigation, and can shed light on Solomon's heritage, for Elizabeth Pledge was a woman to be held in high regard in the memory of her family. When she was about fifteen Elizabeth married Thomas Poindexter in Virginia and a decade later the Poindexter family moved to Surry County, North Carolina. They bought land and built a home on the west bank of the Yadkin River in the area of the Great Bend (now called Donnaha). Over the course of twenty-nine years Elizabeth gave birth to twelve children: six boys and six girls.

She and her family had been in North Carolina about five years when the American colonies declared themselves free and independent states.



Thomas Poindexter was a Patriot. He and his son Francis, who was sixteen in 1780, volunteered at various times to serve in the North Carolina militia.

While her husband and son served as soldiers, Elizabeth Pledge Poindexter also contributed her part in striving for freedom. She was a Patriot spy and conspired a number of times to send messages and official dispatches back and forth across enemy lines. One successful stratagem she employed was to stitch pockets in the inner lining of her daughter's shift, slip a written warning or other message detailing the movement of enemy troops into the concealed pocket, and send the girl alone to the Patriots' camp. Nineteen-year-old Ann Radford was invariably allowed to pass unquestioned, slipping past the camping grounds of the British troops to deliver her secret message.

Elizabeth Pledge's integrity and courage during the years of the Revolution earned her a lasting reputation among the settlers along the Yadkin and a special place in the hearts of her large family.

But just what can be determined of Solomon Sawyers' connection to Elizabeth Pledge? Elizabeth's father was William Pledge, born in Goochland County, Virginia about 1700, and her mother was Bettie Donnaha, the daughter of Chief Donnaha.

The story of Chief Donnahoo (in modern spelling "Donnaha") is dramatically told by Augustus Henry Jarratt, the grandson of Isaac Jarratt an early settler of Yadkin County, and himself a descendant of Elizabeth Pledge. The retelling set forth here is taken from A. H. Jarrett's autobiography included in the collection known as the "Isaac Jarratt Papers" compiled by Patrick Huber in 1992. The family story contains a few historical errors (it was Bath that was besieged, not Edenton), but in its substance it is a factual account of the Tuscarora War.

*In 1711 the fledgling coastal settlement at Edenton, North Carolina was attacked and besieged by hostile Tuscarora Indians. The white settlers were outnumbered, without aid, and had little hope of rescue. They were in grave danger, close to being starved into submitting to the demands of the warriors who surrounded their little settlement. There was, however, one hope and that was to get a message for help to someone outside the town.*

*In spite of the current situation with the hostile Indians, there were in Edenton at that time Indians of the northern Tuscarora who were on favorable terms with the white settlers. One of these brave young men offered to disguise himself as an enemy, then sneak out of town and summon help. He knew his friend and fellow tribesman Donnaha was in the vicinity leading a hunting party.*

*The plan was put into action and the young man was successful in sneaking past the enemy who had the settlement surrounded. He found young Donnaha and explained the plight of the townspeople.*

*These two native men then summoned to their aid a number of other hunters who banded together and attacked the hostile Indians from the rear. The enemy Tuscarora were so taken by surprise that they fled in fear, little reckoning that they had the superior force. Although the Tuscarora War was not ended with this small victory for the settlers, they were at peace for a time sufficient to resupply their larders and to send for troop reinforcements.*

Very little outside legend exists to tell us who Donnaha was. He is described by some sources as a "Cherokee Chief," yet this seems unlikely, for the Cherokee were mountain dwellers. Their hunting territory extended somewhat into the Piedmont of Virginia and North Carolina, but had never been known to extend as far as the coast.

In determining who Donnaha was it is helpful to consider that he lived for some years in Virginia in the present-day county of Goochland, bounded in the south by the James River. After peace was restored between the white settlers on the coast and the warring Tuscarora, the surviving natives were resettled north of the James, in neutral territory. John Lawson, in his 1709 account *A New Voyage to Carolina*, gives the meaning of Donnaha's name in the Tuscaroran tongue as "corn." It seems likely that Donnaha was a Tuscarora Indian, originally of eastern North Carolina, resettled with his tribesmen along the James River.

Donnaha has been described in family tales as "gallant, brave, and fine-looking; [he was] beloved and respected by his own people and the whites." A legendary figure, Donnaha was known among his many descendants as a young chieftain, the son of an important Indian chief in



central Virginia. His memory was kept alive through generations of family stories.

In the aftermath of his exploit at Edenton, Donnaha added to his reputation when he rescued Mary Wentworth, a young woman of "noble English descent" living in Edenton. The girl had been captured during the war by a fierce Tuscarora who demanded that she marry him. But Mary found her rescuer more appealing than her captor and agreed to marry Donnaha and live with him in Virginia, where they raised a large family.

The names of their several sons and daughters are lost except for one of their daughters, Bettie. Bettie Donnaha was raised as a "squaw [in] her father's lodge" on the banks of one of the many creeks that flow across Goochland County into the James River. About 1735 Bettie Donnaha was married to William Pledge; they had five children: William, Francis, Archer, Martha, and Elizabeth, all born in Virginia. It was their youngest daughter Elizabeth, sometimes called Betty or Betsy, who was the Revolutionary War heroine of Surry County, North Carolina.

It is widely believed that Donnaha and Mary Wentworth raised a large family, although only their daughter Bettie's name has been preserved. And it is further believed by the Solomon Sawyers family that Elizabeth Pledge (the daughter of Bettie Donnaha and William Pledge) was part of their family history. Further, Solomon Sawyers claimed to be an Indian. Can these facts be arranged to produce a clear understanding of Solomon Sawyers' heritage?

The descendants of William and Bettie Donnaha Pledge (who lived as white settlers in southern Virginia, Piedmont North Carolina, and Cumberland Kentucky) are well-documented; it is unlikely that Solomon Sawyers was a lineal descendant of Elizabeth Pledge. Her mother, Bettie Donnaha, was raised as an Indian so it is reasonable to assume that her siblings were as well. Bettie's siblings, as she herself was, would have been half Indian - half white. Bettie chose to marry a white man and live in his world.

But, it is possible that one of Bettie's siblings chose an Indian spouse. The offspring of such a match would be three-quarters Indian, only a quarter white (from Mary Wentworth), and would be likely to continue to live an Indian life. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that a daughter of one of Bettie Donnaha's siblings could be the mother of Solomon Sawyer. If such a scenario is true, Solomon's mother would

have been a first cousin to Elizabeth Pledge. Her notoriety in the Revolutionary War would have made her a figure to remember and a family member to claim with pride, even though Solomon might have been somewhat vague as to his exact relationship to her.

As to Clarence Sawyer's belief that Solomon was a Mohawk Indian, that cannot be substantiated. It seems, however, as unlikely as the claim that Donnaha was a Cherokee. Although there are documented instances of both the Seneca and the Cayuga (tribes of New York's Iroquois League, to which the Mohawk were allied) making excursions into the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont in the mid-eighteenth century, the Mohawk in those years migrated northward along the Mohawk River Valley into Canada. It has not been known that any of their tribe moved southward into Virginia or North Carolina.

A case may be made that one of Solomon Sawyer's parents (probably his mother) was a Monacan Indian of central Virginia. The traditional Monacan tribal lands lay in the area today known as Goochland County, along the James River and its tributaries where Donnaha and the other Tuscarora were resettled in 1711. The Monacan, in the eighteenth century, were a dying tribe. About the time of Donnaha's exploits several small bands of Siouan-speaking Piedmont tribes attempted to form a union and thus increase their numbers. Many of this group migrated north to the Susquehanna River Valley in Pennsylvania. Only a few stayed; most had returned to Virginia by 1750.

Another large group of this multi-tribe band of Indians moved south to settle along the Catawba and Pee Dee Rivers. This group was composed of several distinct tribes: the Saponi, Tutelo, Sara (Cheraw), Occaneechee, Keyauwee, Monacan, and others. Although each tribe in these widely-scattered settlements was represented by only a few individuals, distinct tribal identities, including names, customs, and dialects, prevailed into the 1820's.

Solomon Sawyers was born in 1798 in North Carolina. His mother was perhaps the offspring of Donnaha's child (a sibling of Bettie Donnaha) and a member of the Monacan tribe. It is likely that the descendants of Donnaha were a part of the southward migration late in the eighteenth century. Solomon's mother may have followed her cousin, Elizabeth Pledge Poindexter, to the Yadkin Valley.

It is quite possible that Solomon knew himself to be the child of a Monacan Indian. As the years passed perhaps the archaic word "Monacan" became confused with the larger and more widely-known



Indian tribe "Mohawk," either in Solomon's telling or in the understanding of those to whom he confided his family's origins. Solomon's claim, as remembered by his great-grandson Clarence, that he, Solomon, was a "full-blood" Indian probably referred to his maternal heritage. It was well-known among the residents of Stony Ridge that Solomon Sawyers was a free black man, though his Indian blood was apparent.

### *Heritage of Solomon's Father*

Solomon's paternal heritage is much more vague than his maternal lineage. Yet several clues exist to give definition to the father of Solomon Sawyers.

First, attention must be given to the contemporary understanding of the term "free issue," since Solomon made much of the fact that both he and his wife Tabitha had been born "free issue." E.L. Cundiff knew that during the years of slavery, the legal status of a woman determined her child's status: if the mother was a free woman, her child would be born free, even if the father was a slave. He clarified the meaning of the term, "I'll explain to you what a 'free issue' is. It was a person that was mixed race...My grandmother was a free issue...The Sawyers, they originated...as what was considered in that day 'free issue.' [They] brought with [them] some of the traditions of [their] forefathers...a lot of Caucasian and Indian."

It was a matter of pride to Solomon that he had been born "free issue." He referred to his status often, so as to impress his children with its significance: he had never been enslaved. Referred to on various census reports as "colored" and "Black," on the 1850 census Solomon is listed as "Mulatto," which refers to a person of mixed race. That his father was a black man seems likely; that he was a slave seems probable.

Another clue to the identity of Solomon's father is his name: "Solomon"--a Biblical name popular among whites and slaves of the late eighteenth century, but virtually unknown among the Indians of that time; "Sawyers"--an English surname. The First Census of the United States in 1790 yields the information that there were no free black men named "Sawyers" living in western North Carolina in that year. There



were, however, two white men with that surname: Edward and Joseph. Edward Sawyers resided by himself in Iredell County. Joseph, of the "Salisbury district, Rowan County" was over the age of sixteen years. Also living in his household were three white males under age sixteen, two white females (whose ages are not given), and one slave, whether male or female is unrecorded.

Solomon Sawyers was born in 1798 in North Carolina. We may safely assume from this information that his mother was in North Carolina in 1798. It is likely, although of course not certain, that his father also lived in North Carolina. If Solomon's mother traveled from Goochland County Virginia in the closing decade of the eighteenth century, she may have settled in the Yadkin Valley as did many of Virginia's Piedmont Indians of the time. Might she have become the spouse of Joseph Sawyers' slave? Their offspring might have been named "Solomon" and, in the tradition of the time, been given the surname by which his father would have been known: "Sawyers."

There are necessarily many conjectures in establishing the parentage of Solomon Sawyers. Yet much may be inferred by examining the records available, the contemporary explanations of descendants and others related to the community, and historical accounts. The conclusion that Solomon Sawyers was the son of a free Indian woman of mid-Virginia and an enslaved black man of western North Carolina seems reasonable.

### *Stony Ridge*

Wherever he was born and lived prior to 1840 (when his name first appears on the Surry County census) Solomon was probably aware of his family ties to white settlers. He knew he had Indian blood and that the heroine Elizabeth Pledge was a family connection. Elizabeth had married Thomas Poindexter then moved to Surry County in 1771. They bought land on the west bank of the Yadkin River and called their plantation Donnaha in honor of Elizabeth's grandfather.

Around 1830 Solomon Sawyers arrived in Stony Ridge, the community about three miles upriver from Donnaha. He was thirty-two years old and unmarried. He owned no property. No written record remains to verify the sequence of events in Solomon's life in the 1830's, but the fact

that his oldest child was born in 1832 helps to provide a framework for his life in Stony Ridge.

Solomon worked in the 1830's on the John Hauser farm. John's wife, Elizabeth Poindexter, was the daughter of Robert Alexander Poindexter, the youngest son of Elizabeth Pledge and Thomas Poindexter. Solomon Sawyers and R.A. Poindexter were likely second cousins. It was while working on the Hauser farm that Solomon met Tabitha Evans, his future wife.

Although much of Solomon Sawyers' ancestry is conjecture, a reasonable understanding may be gained by studying the record and by giving credence to family lore. Tabitha Evans, however, has a much more sketchy background. She was born in North Carolina in March 1807. We do not know much about where Tabitha spent her first twenty-five years of life, but Clarence Sawyer remembered that his great-grandmother, before coming to Stony Ridge, "lived with a white family in Tobaccoville and took their name." According to E.L. Cundiff, one of her parents was probably white, for Tabitha was light skinned and had been born "free issue." On the 1850 census she was classified as "Mulatto."

Tabitha contributed her genetic makeup to her husband's Indian ancestry; E.L. Cundiff claimed that "the Sawyer family [had a] lot of Caucasian and Indian in them." He explained that, because his own family was a mixture of Indian, black, and Caucasian, he was able to "read some of the traits that came on down [to later Sawyer generations]. Their traditions and family and aspirations...their personality, their hair, their color...all their trends" spoke of their Indian and white heritage.

It is not known what brought Tabitha to the Stony Ridge area of Surry County, but Clarence Sawyer knew that the Hauser farm was "where Tabitha and Solomon met." Solomon Sawyers and Tabitha Evans began living as husband and wife sometime in 1831. E.L. Cundiff "was told by some of the old Sawyers" of a Boyden family at Stony Ridge who hired free blacks to work on his land alongside the many slaves he owned and he believed that Solomon Sawyers, and Tabitha too, might have at one time "way back" worked on the Boyden place.

Nathanael Boyden came to Stony Ridge in 1832. He owned a 2600 acre plantation on the Yadkin River and seven slaves; six of these were female. It seems reasonable to believe that Solomon and Tabitha might have worked for Boyden in their early years in Stony Ridge.



Speaking of the discrimination and hardship experienced by free persons of color during the years before the Civil War, E.L. Cundiff told of things he had heard from his grandmother. "[Free blacks] were the poorest people of the country. They had to live off the sap of a tree... [yet] they had the pride...They lived [and worked] harder than anybody in the world...If you didn't have a fair color, it didn't matter a doggone if you were Indian or black...[you] were classified...with this darker race of people."

While working on the Boyden Plantation, Solomon and Tabitha were not paid with money but with "wheat or corn or meal." As free blacks, the Sawyers had a difficult time just to survive. "They just didn't hardly make it," E.L. said.

In 1832 Solomon and Tabitha's first child, a daughter they named Lucy, was born. By 1840, when Solomon and Tabitha were listed for the first time on the Census of Surry County, they had three daughters under the age of ten: Lucy and Mary survived to be recorded on the 1850 census, but their younger sister, whose name is unknown, died sometime after 1840.

On September 21, 1852, Solomon purchased from Elijah Warden fifty acres of farm land "on the waters of Horne Creek near the Big Yadkin River" for seventy-five dollars. Solomon and Tabitha's farm prospered and their family increased.

In the 1900 Census of Shoals, Tabitha was listed as having had ten children, eight of whom were still living. The Sawyer children were Lucy (1832), Mary (1834), an unknown daughter (born before 1840; died before 1850), Solomon (1842; died about 1861), John (1844), Sarah (1847), Adam (1850), Elizabeth (1852), Josiah (1854), and Jane (1857).



Solomon Sawyers made appli-  
cation for a marriage license  
for him and Byphty Evans

24th November 1831

Stokes County