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# A Letter On Robins Family History

By

**SIDNEY SWAIM ROBINS**



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**Marmaduke Swaim Robins**  
1827-1905



## A LETTER ON ROBINS FAMILY HISTORY

By Sidney Swaim Robins

This is September 10, 1954. I have long considered that before "getting ready to die" I ought to set down a few of the sparse historical facts and traditions about family that I have picked up, and also a little account of my own father and mother. I know I have often wished that my father had made accessible some of the stories of family that were in the back of his own mind, so familiar that he did not think them worth mentioning. As we grow older, interest in such things seems to develop. Today it occurs to me that perhaps I might better not put off my part until ready to die, lest I miss the signal or something happen. Especially since the story is not long, my memory of incidents and events never having been of the kind that makes real story-tellers — never full enough for that.

The first Robins that we know anything about is William Robins, whose Last Will and Testament, though apparently, for lack of indications that it was ever registered, not his final one, is now, in original manuscript and signed, sealed, and witnessed by Christopher Nation and Christopher Vickery, in the possession of my brother, Henry Moring Robins, of Asheboro, North Carolina. This Will is dated October 8, 1786. In it William Robins identifies himself as of Randolph County, N. C., calls himself "Blacksmith," and notes that he is under some indisposition of body which causes him to think of a final disposition of his property. Apparently he was farmer as well as blacksmith, for the will disposes of farm-tools as well as blacksmith-tools, and distributes five hundred and eighty acres of land among the family. These heirs are his sons John and Christopher, his grandson Abel (son of Silas deceased), and his widow and youngest son — these last two together. The widow was to have the home-place during her lifetime, and after her this youngest son Daniel. Daniel evidently lived with his parents.

Cousin Sarah Lambert, in her seven-page manuscript history of the Robins family, relays the report that William "took up much government land in Randolph County in the long ago," and that may represent older family tradition on the point of his being an original settler in those parts. For Sarah's mother, who was my father's oldest sister,



had a long memory and many stories to tell which I am sorry to have forgotten.

We do not know when William was born or when he died. He must have lived on a while after getting ready to die with a Will — a Will which is one of the two things we know about him. The census of 1790 apparently brings him forth once more into the light. This census lists only the heads of households. It gives one and only one William Robbins (the census is responsible for its own spelling and often makes a curious job of it) in Randolph County. It lists eight other Robbinses at least, including two Johns and a Christopher. One of the Johns and this Christopher could be the two older sons of William. Daniel is not named and would not be, because he lived on the home-place with his father and mother and was not the head of a household.

Early censuses are not always too correct in other matters than spelling, but this one fits on to the Last Will fairly well on the whole, though with one minor problem and one larger and rather interesting one. William Robbins, or Robins in his own way of it, is credited in the census report with three male dependents "over sixteen years of age, including heads of families"; and with none under sixteen. Two of these dependents would be Daniel (aged 20) and Grandson Abel. The third could be a younger brother of Abel, over sixteen, or son Christopher — if the Christopher in the census came from another family. Our Christopher remained a bachelor. "Christopher" and "Marmaduke" were among the names much in use in that part of Randolph, in several different families.

William is further credited with eight white female dependents, including heads of families. These could be his wife Frances; his daughters Elizabeth, Frances, Charity, Ann, Rachel (all mentioned in the will); the widow of Son Silas; and one unknown. Seven out of eight is not bad. Many a married woman has an unmarried sister alongside.

The more serious difficulty in putting together Census and Will is that the former credits Father William with owning nine slaves, and of slaves there is in the Will no mention. Could he have acquired that many slaves between 1786 (the date of the Will) and 1790 (the date of the Census)? Could he have purposed to free his slaves or to summon the family and dispose of them in some other way than by Will — that is by gift? Could there be a mis-print in the Census? Could



the William of our Will have died before 1790, as he half-expected to do, and could some other William be the only one in the county at that later date?

If this last were the case, then why is there no Daniel listed in the census? He would be a land-owner and head of household; the paternal roof would have ceased to hide him. Moreover he would be living on the home-place of his father, a considerable land-owner of the past. My brother has a deed, dated 1793, from Christopher Robins to Daniel, conveying a hundred and sixty acres of land on Polecat Creek (his inheritance and a little more apparently), and calling for Abel Robins's line as a boundary. So Daniel was locally a coming man, and where is he in the census if the William of the census is not his father, and if he is not accounted for as a dependent?

We might interject that since Daniel married in December 1790, there is a bare possibility that his wife is the one female missing to make up the eight called for in the census.

We were rather surprised when we found William credited with owning nine slaves, even though nine might be only one sizeable family of them. Our original prejudice was that there could not have been very many slaves in upper Randolph in those times. But looking the census report over further, we find there were actually more than we had supposed. William Bell, not so far off, is credited with sixteen. He was the largest slave-owner that we definitely know to have lived fairly near our folks. But there were quite a few others. Perhaps in our case the real puzzle is that our family, in its later history, showed no signs of having fallen from any slave-owning class, and that they intermarried twice with the Swaims, some of whom we know to have been with the Quakers on the slavery question. But the thing is not impossible. Randolph County was short on aristocrats anyhow, as in some degree was the Old North State.

Well, most of the Robinses I know are rather fond of mystery stories, so we drop this little one on them as we go along.

William's son Daniel is our ancestor. Born in 1770, he lived until October 8, 1831. In 1790 he married Massah, daughter of John and Elizabeth Vickery Swaim.

Sarah Lambert says that Daniel must have had more than the ordinary country education of his time. I may say that



all the notations I have seen in the Daniel Robins or the Marmaduke Swaim Bibles (Sarah had both of these and her daughter Massah has them today) are written in a right clerkly hand that would be a credit to any of us and more than that to some. The proof though which Sarah gives of Daniel's literacy or education is of a different kind. She says that she has in her possession an old torn and tattered manuscript book containing original hymns and poems written by Daniel. Somehow or other I missed seeing that book, perhaps failed to ask for it at the right time. (Massah Lambert told me the other day that she thinks she has it still, but that it is mostly illegible.) It is said that he had the design, never carried into effect, of getting out a book of poetry or hymnology, all of his own stuff. The only proof of his talents available to me now is a single hymn of his which Sarah got printed in the Asheboro Courier. Here it is, and some of us have no doubt written worse poetry in our time:

Ye glittering orbs around the skies,  
That speak his glories in disguise,  
Your silent language cannot tell  
The powers of Emmanuel.

Tall mountains that becloud the sky,  
Whilst all the hills around them lie,  
Whilst time endures, you cannot tell  
The powers of Emmanuel.

Ye World, and worlds with all your throng,  
Through every climate extend the song.  
Guilty sinners preserved from hell  
By Christ the King Emmanuel.

Behold Him leave his Father's throne;  
Behold him bleed, and hear him groan;  
Death's strong chain would fail to tell  
The strength of King Emmanuel.

Behold Him take his ancient seat  
Whilst millions bow beneath his feet;  
He conquered all the hosts of hell;  
We'll crown him King Emmanuel.

His fame shall spread from pole to pole,  
Whilst glory rolls from soul to soul.  
The gospel is sent forth to tell  
The glories of Emmanuel.



Whilst I am singing of His name,  
My soul rejoices in the same.  
I'm full, I'm full, but cannot tell  
The love of King Emmanuel.

I long to hear His trumpet sound  
And see his glories all around.  
I then shall shout, and sing and tell  
Salvation through Emmanuel.

Ten thousand thousands join the song,  
Ten thousand thousands in the throng.  
He saved us from a gaping hell;  
All glory to Emmanuel.

To me at least it feels funny not to know anything about your great-grandfather except his having written such a hymn as that. I mean anything personal, for dates and that mention in the Will are not personal. It is almost as bad as if the family had to reconstruct me out of a bit of Woofus poetry. One guesses that he was a better churchman than most of the Robinses we have known, and that he was impressed by the popular theology of the day enough for some of it to come out of him rather sonorously. He must have had more education than a good many people of his day, and it seems as if he had some ear for music or rhythm as well as rhyme.

Daniel and Massah Swaim Robins had seven sons and only one daughter. The sons were Eli, William, Daniel, John, Christopher, Joshua, Richard. The daughter was named Charity and died at the age of thirteen.

Sarah Lambert lists nine children of this second William and four of this Christopher (Daniel's sons), and no doubt their descendants are scattered around in Randolph and thereabouts. But there are none of them that we know just how to hang on the family tree, or to connect up with. And besides they must all have taken a second 'b' unto themselves.

Once when I was a student at Chapel Hill, I met Dr. Kemp P. Battle on the campus. He was ex-president of the University and the man who chiefly revived it after the Civil War. He was now professor of history, and he was always full of antiquarian interests. He inquired about my father's health (he had taught my father back in the 1850's), and asked me presently if I knew the origin of my family name. I told him No. He said it was a shortened form of Robinson, just as



William Robins - wife "Frances"

Daniel Robins m. Massah Swaim  
(1770-1831) (1768-1846)

John Robins m. Margaret Swaim  
(1799-1886) (1801-1872)

Marmaduke Swaim Robins m. Annie Eliza Morning  
(1827-1905) (1853-1928)

Henry M. Robins Sidney S. Robins Marmaduke R.  
(1880-) (1883-) (1887-1953)

Anthony Swaim (landed Staten Island c. 1700)

William Swaim, of Surry County, N.C.

John Swaim m. Elizabeth Vieker  
(born 1748) (born 1750) Michael Swaim

Massah Swaim  
(who married Daniel R.)

Marmaduke Swaim m. Sarah Fannon  
(1771-1828) (1776-?)

Margaret Swaim  
(who married John Robins)



Roberts is of Robertson, Richards of Richardson, and Davids and Davis of Davidson; and that some people had put two 'b's in it to keep it from being pronounced "Ro-bins," the 'o' long. I presume that is correct. So far as I can discover, from Father William on down our direct line has always adhered to the original form of the name.

Daniel's son John, my grandfather, and his brother Joshua married two sisters, respectively Margaret and Esther Swaim. Joshua moved West in early life, eventually to Iowa, and the family in Carolina lost track of him before or about the time of the Civil War. I chanced upon one of his descendants in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when the young man with whom I was dealing about a fountain pen inquired across the counter how I got the "Swaim" in the middle of my name. I had given the invocation at Michigan University Commencement the day before and my name had been printed in full on the program. That is how he got it. When it came out that my father was named Marmaduke Swaim Robins, that clicked in his mind at once. One value in an unusual name like "Marmaduke!" The young man was a great grandson of Joshua, name of Ryder. I believe somebody in his family had invented a fountain pen, or improved on one. If that inventiveness came on the Robins side, it would be the one faint touch of scientific genius in the family up to or preceding the present generation.

The suggestion of possible obligation to other tribes we have intermarried with makes this a good point to bring in the Swaim family. My father used to say he was three-fourths Swaim, and he was proud of the fact. Both his mother Margaret and his paternal grandmother Massah were Swaims. He always pronounced it "Swim" (as in "swimming") and so did everybody else in North Carolina until some member of the tribe sprouted an interest in phonetics or reformed spelling and set a new style, or until some logical-minded schoolteachers got hold of the Swaim children and persuaded them that such pronunciations as the ancient one just simply could not be. The 1790 Census spells the name "Swim."

Father's uncle, William Swaim, became a rather famous editor in North Carolina considering the very short period of his active life at that vocation, which was only six or seven years. In fact, he was a challenging liberal for the times. The North Carolina Historical Review for July 1953,



published by the state's department of Archives and History, has an interesting article on ante-bellum newspapers of the State in which it gives an impressive and interesting account of the **Greensboro Patriot**, and in particular of the strenuous controversies over slavery and free speech which that paper entered into while under the leadership of William Swaim. This was along about 1830. William Swaim had a daughter who married a Porter and became the mother of William Sidney Porter, known to the literary world as "O. Henry." An enlarged photograph or daguerreotype of Editor William hangs alongside the O. Henry collection in the Greensboro Public Library. The year before he died, 1834, he started a second newspaper in what must have been the very rural hamlet of New Salem, in Randolph County, and made his "distant cousin," Benjamin Swaim, editor.

Benjamin Swaim appears to have been a son of the eldest brother of great-grandmother Massah. He was long a lawyer at Asheboro and published several legal text-books designed to help intelligent people be their own lawyer. More sensible project then than now, since the law has become so complicated. Swaim's "Justice," printed first at New Salem, went through another edition or two elsewhere. He also published in monthly installments from that New Salem office a book of legal forms and general advice, garnished with a few stories and bits of humor.

After Editor William Swaim's death, the **Greensboro Patriot** presently came under the leadership of another Swaim from New Salem and from the printing office which had been established there. Lyndon Swaim was a son of great grandmother Massah's younger brother, Moses. He was called to the Greensboro editorship when, a year or so after its fighting editor's death, the paper had fallen to a low ebb. Lyndon Swaim succeeded well, carried along in that post much longer than his more exciting and stirring predecessor, and was a prominent citizen of Greensboro for almost half a century. He presently married the widow of William Swaim. I have recently seen a newspaper sketch of his life written by Judge R. D. Douglas. After paying tribute to Lyndon Swaim as editor, the judge mentions his services as Clerk of the Court for quite a period, and then tells of how in his later years he took up the study of architecture and rendered a valiant and honorable service to his community along that line. He was also an elder of the Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, which church had his life written up for its records.



A lot of North Carolina Swaims went west before the Civil War as did a lot of the Coffins and others. Cousin Oscar Coffin claims that his family was mostly drained out of North Carolina, and mostly to Indiana, on account of discomfort over the slavery question. Some of the Coffins were Quakers, and some of the Swaims associated a lot with the Quakers, on top of being close neighbors, there in northeast Randolph County, and in Guilford. William Swaim, for example, shared the Quaker view of slavery. Slavery may have had a good deal to do with many of our Swaim relatives leaving for Indiana, which of course was a big, new, fertile country anyhow. In any case they got there. In the year 1890 there was a Swaim family reunion at David Stanton's, Level Cross, at which my father spake, and to which he took Henry and me, and to which came a number of Swaims and Swaim kin from the West. I remember in particular a stalwart old farmer from Henry County, Indiana, with six stout sons in his train or his quiver. He had made the trip back by wagon, and they tell me that he made the trip as many as eight times before he died. I think his name was Jonathan.

Driving by car across Indiana, to or from Galesburg, Illinois, where we lived the two years from 1928 to 1930, I looked up Mrs. Ella Tomlinson ("Tomlinson" is another Randolph Quaker name), at the town of Summitville, she being at that time secretary of the Swaim Family Association, of Indiana, or in general, I know not which. From her I got that short sketch of old Swaim family genealogy which I turned over to Sarah Lambert and which she included in her paper.

This record begins with Anthony Swaim, who came to America "from Holland about 1700," and settled near Richmond, Staten Island, New York. He had four sons: Michael, Mathias, William, and one whose name is not known. Michael, the brief notation continues, remained on Staten Island and his descendants "live up the Hudson." Mathias removed to Essex County, N. J. William settled in Surry County, N. C. (The fourth may have settled in Ohio, but that is a suggestion from some other source.)

William of Surry County, N. C., had three sons. Of these we are told that Michael and Moses "probably remained in Surry County." Son John, born in 1748, settled in Randolph in 1767, and the very same year was married to Elizabeth



Vickery, she being seventeen years old and he nineteen at the time.

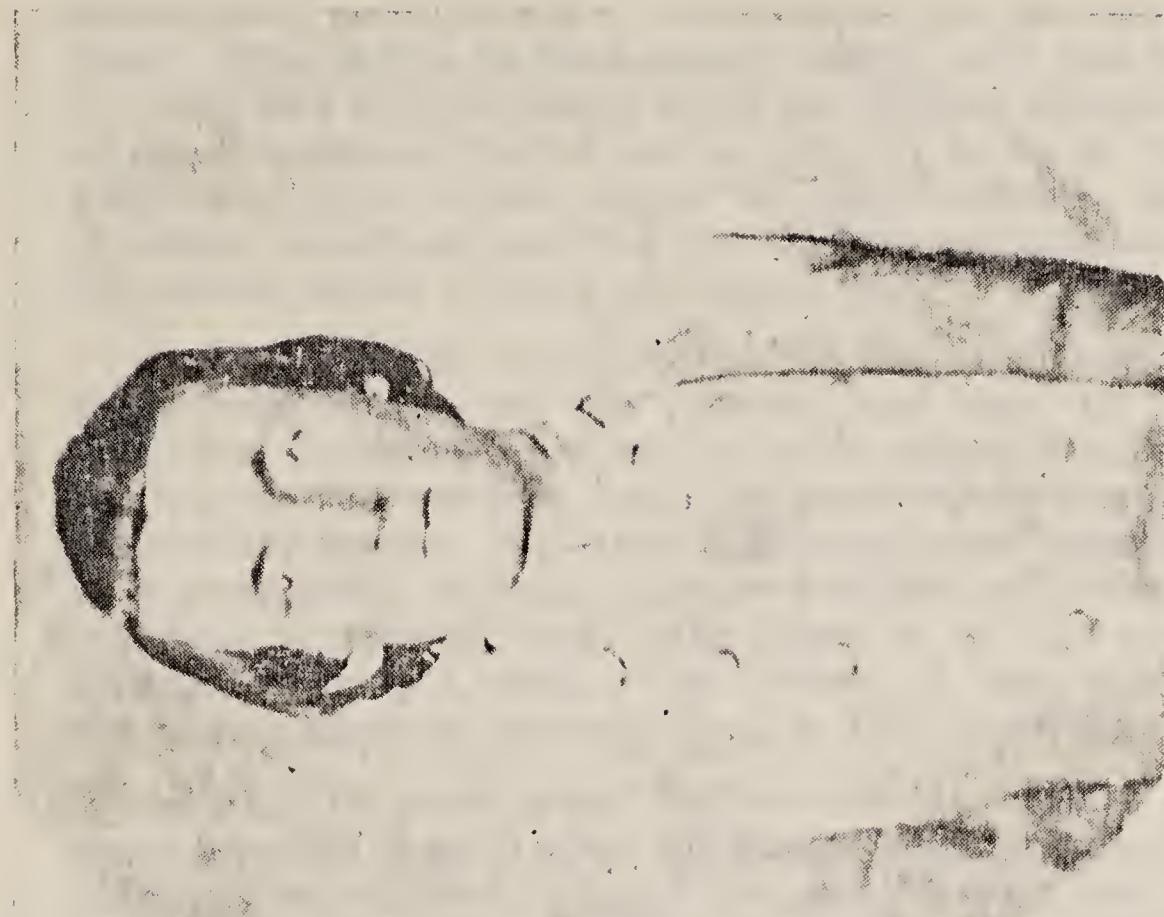
In his biographical sketch of Lyndon Swaim Judge Douglas has this to say about our common ancestor, John Swaim, and his wife: "He was born in 1748, reared in the pioneer surroundings of the times and became a friend and hunting companion of Daniel Boone. His wife was Elizabeth Vickery, a daughter of one of the Regulators who became the vanguard of American freedom on the field of Alamance."

If you do not know your North Carolina history, "Alamance" is the name of a battlefield in the county of that name on which rebellious colonists of the state, led and inspired by Herman Husbands of the northeast part of Randolph County and before that of Pennsylvania met and stoutly opposed the forces of the Royal governor in the year 1771.

Judge Douglas adds that John Swaim, settling in Randolph, "carved a home and farm out of the wilderness, and became a successful farmer and raised a large family." We may specify that the "large family" means eleven children, eight sons and three daughters. Their eldest daughter, Massah, as we have seen, married Great-grandfather Daniel Robins. One of their sons was named Marmaduke, which leads me to comment that this name occurred at least three times in the Swaim family before it was handed on to my father. This particular owner of that moniker was born in 1784 and died in 1822. Both he and his brother Moses, Lyndon's father, are buried in the almost lost Timber Ridge cemetery near Level Cross. (We find the cemetery and their headstones in December 1954. It is a Swaim family cemetery in the main, although there are many of the graves marked only by an unreadable or an uninscribed stone.)

Sarah Lambert relays the tradition that all the Swaims in North Carolina are descended from William of Surry County. And after his son John comes to Randolph we hear no more in our traditions of Surry relatives coming down. But therein lies another small mystery. In our old friend, the 1790 census, John Swaim ("Swim") is the only Swaim listed in Randolph County. Of course his eldest son would not then have arrived at the status of "head of a family." In nearby Guilford County, there are no Swaims at all given, and that is not surprising. In Surry, there is listed a Michael Swaim, and two or three more. The question then is whence comes this





Isaiah S. Robins



J. Madison Robins



Marmaduke, not John's son of that name, but the one whose family Bible is now in the Lambert family; who was born in 1771 and died in 1829; whose eldest son William became editor of the Greensboro **Patriot** and is referred to by O. Henry's biographer as "a distant cousin" of Lyndon Swaim; and two of whose daughters married two Robins brothers to make the second Swaim cross in our family line?

Perhaps it is just as well to bear in mind that our earliest public records are not too reliable; and also that family traditions, especially when not based on almost contemporary written records, are less than fully dependable. Here is this Marmaduke Swaim, with that family-pet, that Randolph-pet of a given-name, showing up from nowhere so far as either tradition or records show. My guess is he was a son of Michael of Surry County. The Ryders, of Ann Arbor, had the name "Michael" strongly fixed in their tradition.

As already noted, John Robins and his brother Joshua made a second descent upon the Swaim tribe, and carried off Margaret and Esther. Then John and Margaret, my grandparents, had four sons and four daughters. The eldest child was Massah, Mrs. Lambert's mother and a very familiar figure of my youth. Her husband was a Primitive or Hard-shell Baptist preacher. That kind of Baptists did not have regularly settled preachers, whether the fact had anything to do with their distinguishing doctrine of Predestination or not. The ministerial vocation was a precarious one among them. I always knew Aunt Massah as living in a log cabin under pretty primitive conditions. It seems as if her hat was always a bandanna handkerchief. I forget how many times she had read the Bible through from cover to cover; but so far as I know she holds the family record on that. She had four children, but the Lamberts are her only living descendants.

Marmaduke Swaim Robins, my father, came next in the family, being born in 1827. After him, the next son was Isaiah Spurgeon Robins, born May 30, 1837, who was one of the two brothers lost in the Civil War.

There is in the family a good though now dim daguerreotype of Isaiah Robins. Old Doctor Sam Henley, the only doctor settled in Asheboro when I first knew it, once took me aside to talk about Isaiah and to relieve his mind from one little suppressed thought of what might have been. He said:



"Your father is a brainy man, but Isaiah was the abler of the two. And he was physically the most perfect man I ever saw in my life." Isaiah and my father taught school together at a place or two, and Isaiah was supposed to be especially skillful at composing dialogues and teaching the then much-sought art of it. He studied law on his own, while teaching school by himself after Marmaduke had got to the University, took the bar examinations, and was licensed to practice shortly before he volunteered for the Confederate Army. I believe he started in as second lieutenant but he was finally brevetted to a captaincy at Gettysburg, only a day or so before he was "shot through the heart" on that field. I have seen the letter from his commanding officer announcing this to the family. I have a "Yankee" horse-pistol and holster which Isaiah brought back from some earlier battlefield.

William Thomas Robins was fatally wounded in the battle of Chancellorsville. He was just twenty-one.

The third son in the war, John Madison, was severely wounded at least once, but survived and moved to Illinois, Missouri, and eventually to California. He died in San Diego. My father once took what there then was of the family (one boy, Henry) to Missouri to see Uncle Mad and his folks, and my mother long kept up a familiar correspondence with his wife, "Sister Nettie." Uncle Mad's letters were always homesick for North Carolina. He never got over it. He had left because the state was desperately poor after the war. Like other Southern soldiers, he probably needed more disability-pension money than he was able to get from his bankrupt home-state. I am not sure that he got any, for the state was late in coming to it. He did a lot of moving around and never really prospered. At one time he sold sewing machines.

He had two sons, Marmaduke and Lee. Lee died young and both of them died single. I had some correspondence with Duke some twenty-five years ago, as did my brother Duke. At that time he was a merchant and secretary of the Chamber of Commerce at McCall, Idaho, and presently he died there. On our Western trip in 1951, my wife and I drove up to McCall to talk to some of his old friends.

Of the three sisters of my father besides Aunt Massah Trogdon, Sally died young, Charity married Uncle Dick Curtis and lived just long enough for me to recall seeing her once. Esther lived with the Curtises and stayed on after her sister's



death, by this time not at all pretty and in particular with weak, squinty eyes. I have often wondered if Vitamin A and D pills would have done as much for her, and especially for her eyes, as they did for me and mine when I discovered them in mid-life. I have often said that those pills amounted to a religious conversion with me. And I stick to it. They have taught me how deep a materialistic foundation we have, although of course "there is room at the top" and our conscious and moral efforts add something. So I can't help wondering about poor squinty "Aunt Hessie."

I used often to visit the Curtis farm and stay a week or two. They had the first flock of guineas I ever saw, raised sorghum cane, drove five miles to a grist mill for flour and meal (we Asheboro people did that too), and cooked at an open fire-place and made real corn-pone by whelming a pot on the hot hearthstone and heaping with embers. They usually sat down to a meal with just one dish in the center of the table, but always with plenty of bread and butter and sorghum on the side. It was primitive all right; or it was after-the-war Southern poverty unable to make progress fast and raise the standard of living.

The Curtis farm, near Gray's Chapel, was bought by my father in 1857, as a place on which to settle his aging parents and the girls. During the war, he bought them a slave or two, the first in the family since quite a while at least. The first of these Negroes very soon, and no doubt very properly from his point of view, ran away or took to the "underground." The second, whose name was Mac, stood by until the war's end, and was a real help. The idea in buying a slave for that small farm was that with John Robins past work, with three boys in the army, and with Marmaduke busied elsewhere, something with pants on was needed around the farm. I mean something that was allowed to wear pants in those days.

I do not have much to report about my Grandfather, John Robins; but it is difficult to dodge the impression that for one reason or another he was not much of a success. He certainly never moved in the literary world even to the extent that his Father, Daniel, had done. He farmed it and moved from Randolph to Guilford and back, buying this little fifty acres and that, and never bettering himself. The last move he made on his own was to the new cotton mill at Cedar Falls, where the girls went to work in the mill, or "factory" as they called



it then. It was at this time or earlier that my father was making some money by cutting letters on tombstones for people. And he and Isaiah were doing quite a lot of school-teaching from this time on. You didn't need much preparation for that. My guess is that father was around twenty-one by the time of the Cedar Falls move.

My brother Henry, who has read the first draft of these recollections and notes, gives the following about New Salem days, which go a considerable distance back of the Cedar Falls period:

"I have more than once heard M. S. R. mention that the first book he ever bought was purchased with the proceeds of chestnuts he gathered in the woods and took to New Salem. At that time the woods in that section contained chestnut trees perhaps as numerous as oak. Swine running at large ate the nuts to such an extent that the chestnuts did not reproduce themselves in the woods. Chestnut timber was valued highly and preferred for the old-fashioned rail fences which were then numerous. The book bought was the **Malte-Brun Geography and Atlas** which I have here at the office. In the front it bears the following entry: 'Marmaduke S. Robins, his book, bought at Chamness and Woodses Store, Price 1.25 cents, this the 27 of Jan., 1841.'"

He was then thirteen and a half years old.

Returning to Cedar Falls: Running a store there was a good citizen by the name of Henry B. Elliott, who presently offered and urged upon Marmaduke a loan to help him go to Chapel Hill. I have heard my father say that he had been in school just twenty-one months in all (of course he meant as a pupil, not teacher) when he started for Chapel Hill on foot or by somebody's wagon, where he took the entrance examinations and was admitted, I believe with some conditions, to the Sophomore Class.

He used to tell how he felt at a loss in his first Greek class at the University, in competition in particular with the two Bingham brothers (one of them father of the recent ambassador to Great Britain), and with others who had enjoyed the advantage of the best private schools in the state. But after a time and with great difficulty he found out the name of the superior Greek grammar they were always quoting in class to the professor's satisfaction (I think it was Gesenius),



managed at length to obtain a copy, and after that moved up alongside them. At graduation he tied for the Valedictory with Joseph Buckner Killibrew, of Tennessee. I saw Killibrew and my father meet at a reunion of their class the class of 1856—their forty-fifth anniversary it probably was.

In a way I have been led ahead of my story. The point was that for one reason or another John Robins did not or could not do very much for his children by way of giving them advantages. And so they had few advantages, and had to make their own way. My mother at least saw nothing much in John Robins but a pretty rough old countryman. Of course she knew him only in his old age.

Records are few in Randolph, and outside the small group of my father's descendants, there are left in North Carolina or elsewhere only these relatives on the Robins side whose relationship is definitely known and fixed: first, Sarah Lambert's three offspring: daughter Massah, long a good teacher in the Asheboro high school, now retired; son Bunyan, who runs a printing shop in Asheboro, and his family; the descendants of another son, Mahlon who has died. And secondly: Mrs. Ryder, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, if she is still living, her children, and various relatives of hers that are listed by Sarah Lambert.

And now to turn squarely to my father, Marmaduke Swaim Robins, born August 31, 1827, died June 27, 1905. Graduating at Chapel Hill in the class of '56, he had already studied law under Judge Battle of that place sufficiently to pass the tests and be licensed to practice in the county courts on December 30 of the same year. However he had debts to pay, and four years of teaching school intervened before he fully took up legal practice.

His college standing in mathematics had been such as to bring him at this period an offer to join the staff of the "Nautical Almanac" printed in Cambridge, Mass., alongside Harvard University. I believe he felt that accepting this offer would further certain interests he had developed in astronomy as well as mathematics. He wished to accept, and if he had done so our story would be different in respects unimaginable. But he had engaged himself to teach a country school, at



Middleton Academy, near Franklinville, in Randolph, and the school trustees refused to let him off the bargain. He felt bound to them, and nothing was more sacred to him than his pledged word. He came that near beating me to Harvard.

Among his personal possessions, kept in an old bureau in a back room, there lay all during the years I was growing up, two sets of instruments for making mathematical or surveyor's drawings, and three brass telescopes. The longest of these last stretched out to about three feet. I have it now and occasionally train it on the lake towards Mt. Washington, but they make better lenses now. I have often wondered if these instruments were romantic symbols or actual vestiges of an early ambition which died a sort of hard death, underneath a sense of duty. But he studied law too at the University, at the same time as mathematics.

Isaiah Robins was his assistant at Middleton and Science Hill, one or both. Then M.S.R. taught for two years at "Little" Washington, N. C. He took the necessary oath for entering upon the practice of law in the county courts in February 1858, but was not licensed in the Superior Courts until December 1860. From that time on he was out of teaching and fully immersed in the law — and politics. His first law office was in the yard at the Curtis farm. It is where I used to sleep when there on a vacation. Probably about the time he entered practice in earnest he moved his office to Asheboro. There he presently formed a partnership with Samuel S. Jackson, son-in-law of Jonathan Worth, who in the war period became treasurer of North Carolina and governor in 1865. When Jonathan Worth, himself a lawyer, went to Raleigh to live, he left a lot of his office business to the firm of Jackson and Robins, which of course gave the firm quite a boost. He advised a correspondent of his that Jackson and Robins were both good lawyers. My information is that Jackson was the good mixer of the two and that he preferred the office end of the business, willingly leaving the rough-and-tumble of the court room to his partner.

When M.S.R. was running for the legislature in 1862, Governor Worth (this of course was before he was governor) wrote to A. M. Tomlinson, of upper Randolph: "I know of no citizen of the county superior to Robins in intelligence, judgment and acquirements—and I know no man anywhere more honorable and upright."



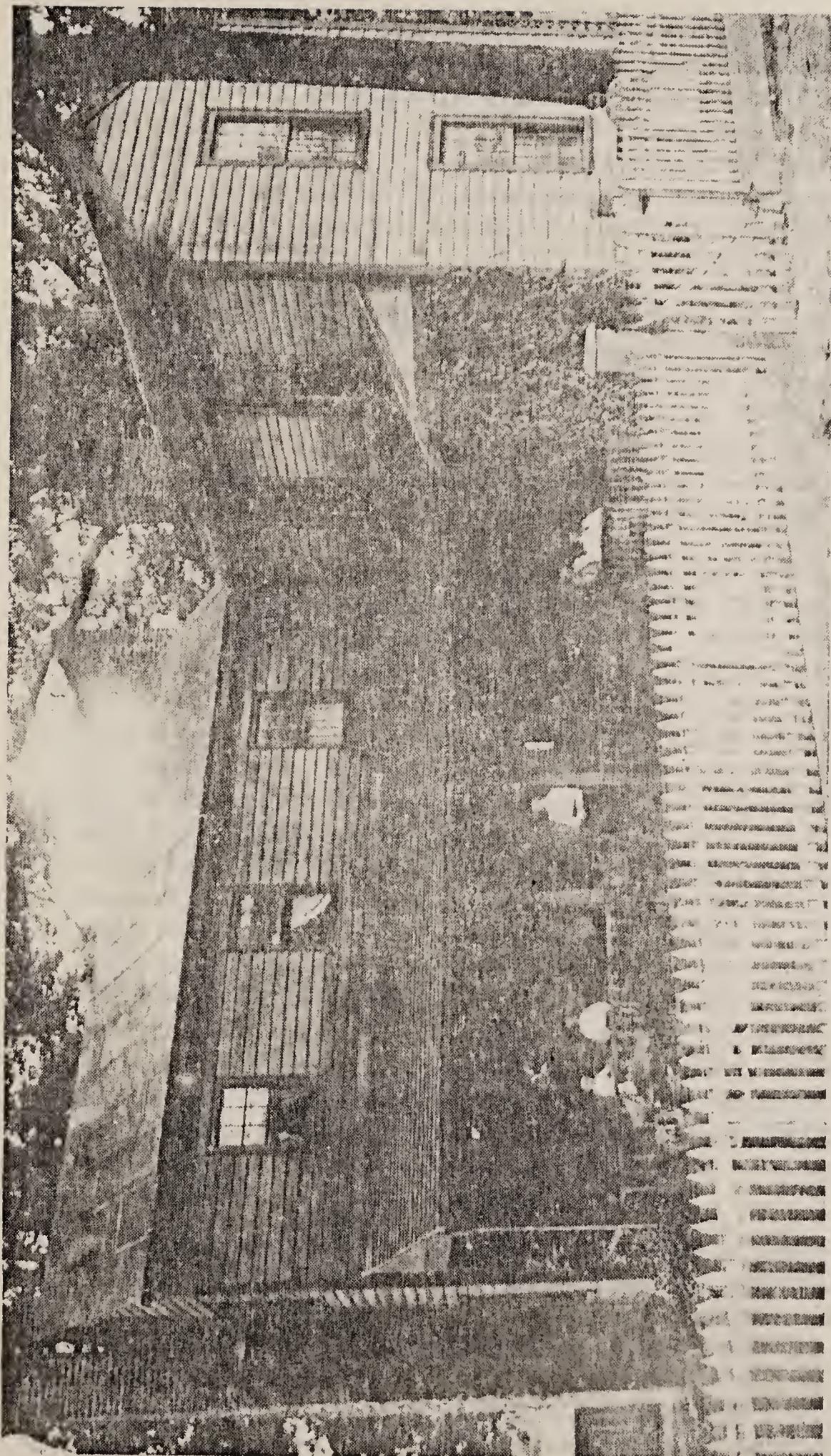
Sam Jackson did not long survive the Civil War, and then M.S.R. went on alone, without taking another partner, until my older brother joined him in 1903. Fifty-one years ago that was; and Henry is still at it and going strong on top of our father's forty-five years. I guess that is the nearest thing to a real tradition anywhere in the family so far.

I am unable to fit together all the variety of things that occupied my father during the Civil War. I have somewhere heard that at the beginning of it there was an informal family council at which it was agreed that Marmaduke, being the one of the boys established in life, was the one to stay home and take care of the paternal family and the spinster sisters. He was in the legislature, House of Representatives, in 1862. For a time he was private secretary to North Carolina's famous war-governor, Zebulon Baird Vance. He may have known Vance at Chapel Hill, a boy from the mountain back-country who made good. M.S.R. was for a time editor of the *Raleigh Conservative*, an important paper over the state. At the very wind-up of the Confederacy, he was treasurer of the state Literary Fund, which represented the beginnings of public education in North Carolina. I have heard him tell of being on the official train, shuttling between Goldsboro and Greensboro in the effort to dodge General Sherman, trying to take care of the aforesaid fund and learning to play chess. That game he always had a fondness for, but latterly found it over-strenuous, the same as I do.

Also at some late period during the war which I do not know how to fit in, he was a captain in the Home Guard and had the rather thankless and ticklish job of rounding up deserters in Randolph and returning them to the army. Many Randolph people were not in sympathy with the war. Some of them were Quakers. There were few if any large slave-plantations in Randolph, and many people felt that the war was the plantation people's fight. The county has been notoriously Republican in its normal status ever since the Civil War, and the facts I am now recounting may have something to do with that. I surprised a Connecticut-Yankee writer at Chapel Hill last winter by telling him that certain counties in North Carolina, instancing Randolph, had always been normally Republican and still were. Randolph has a complete or nearly complete set of Republican office-holders at this moment. Well, sympathy with the war was not a marked sentiment in the old county. There used to be a rail



The Old Home





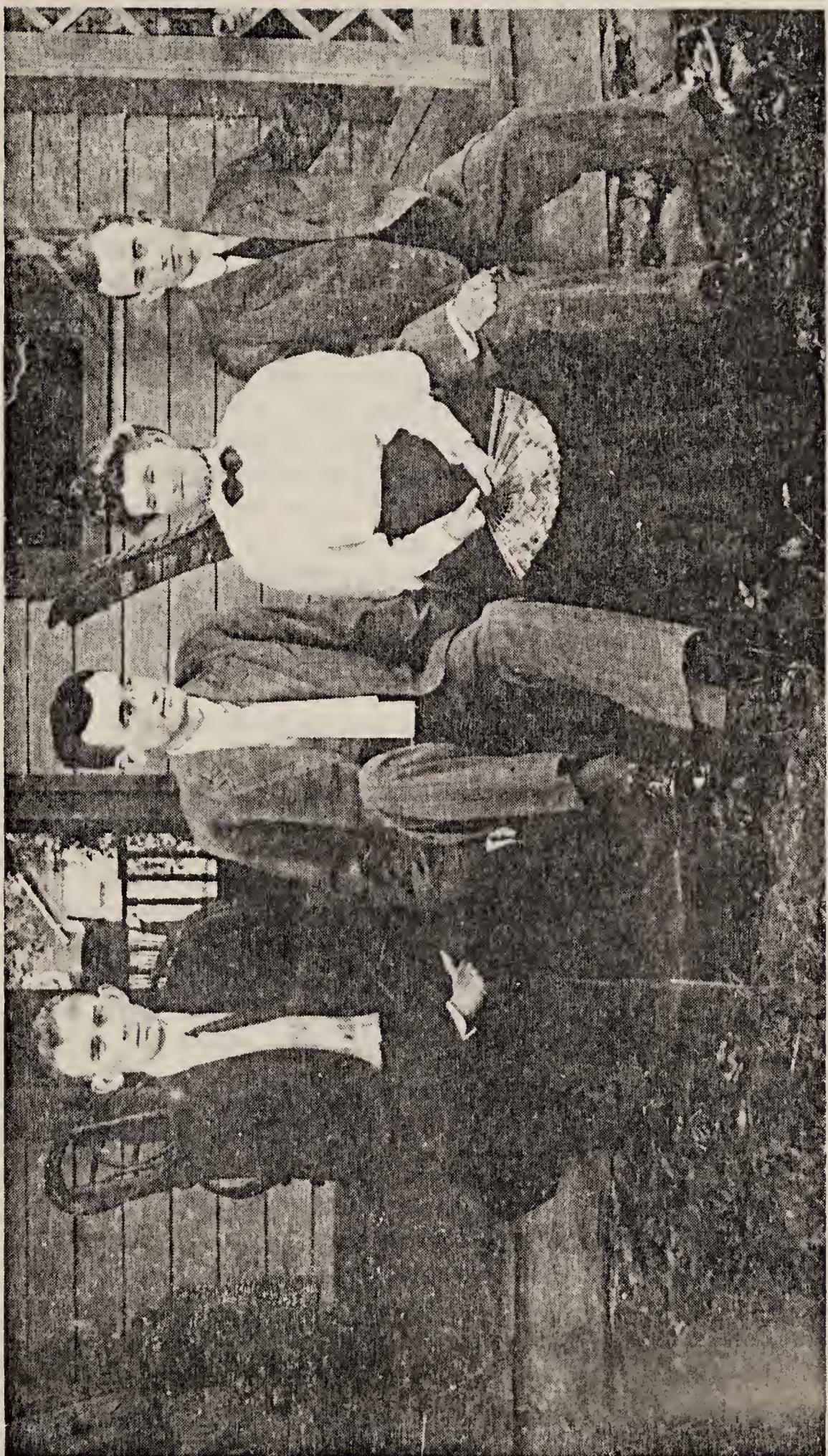
fence alongside the road between Asheboro and Franklinville at which my father would sometimes point his buggy whip and tell that a deserter once shot at him from behind that fence. Maybe only to scare him off! They said he was fearless in walking up to the door of a wanted man, that he did his duty without fear of consequences. I don't know about the fear, but I imagine he got an early start doing his duty as he saw it.

After the war, as during it, he was Whig or Conservative in politics over against Radical, until that distinction turned into Democrat versus Republican. Then over a long stretch of years he and Dr. John Milton Worth, brother of the Governor, and Zebedee Rush, were active Democratic leaders in the county and familiar representatives in both branches of the legislature. Governor Worth had died in 1869.

I think I may say that over most of the last quarter of the century he was the leading lawyer in the county, besides having considerable practice in Moore, Montgomery and Stanly. At least George S. Bradshaw, another lawyer and also long clerk of the court, once told me that there was a time when my father was attorney for every executor and administrator in the county, no other lawyer having a look-in. Mr. Bradshaw attributed this to two causes: one, that everybody trusted Marmaduke Robins's honesty and his knowledge of the law, and the other that he never learned to charge for his services. In fact, said Mr. Bradshaw, his fees were so small that it was extremely hard on other lawyers. My father realized and often stressed the point of how painfully the average farmer earned his dollar. He had been through the poverty mill and had been given a set by it, as the family came to know very well indeed. With him, in spending money, it was everything for necessity or for the education of his boys, but nothing for luxury or appearance; and his ideas of luxury were old-fashioned. At Chapel Hill, we were taught to keep those expenses down.

On July 24, 1878, when he was over fifty years old, he married Annie Eliza Moring, born November 9, 1853, eldest daughter of William Henry Moring, Sr. Mother had one brother, W. H., Jr., and two sisters. These provide a lot of Asheboro and scattered relatives, so I will briefly set up the sketch. Uncle Will Moring had four daughters: Agnes who married John Porter; Edith, Henry Craven; Marion, Sulon





The West Wing Porch

Sidney      Henry      Mother

Duke      (about 1905)



Stedman; and Annie, Kemp Alexander. Mother's sister Ida married Alex Coffin, father of Will and Oscar Coffin, of the first Mrs. Frank Page, and of Bess Coffin. Aunt Mag (Margaret) married John Anderson and Blanche McGlohon (Mrs. Don McGlohon) is their only child.

This is the point to go back one generation in the Moring family. Grandfather Moring, whose parents I do not know about for lack of wanting to know at the right time, had married Jane Jackson, of near Petersburg, Virginia. He lived to be eighty-seven and she ninety-one or two. My first recollection of life on this earth is of driving a street car in Petersburg, Va. We had gone there to visit my great-uncle, Robert Jackson, a respected citizen of that place. I was just about three years old. The horses were tame and the driver let me hold the reins. The recollection is still vivid. Grandmother used to claim that she was distantly related to Old Hickory, a point on which I am more willing to give credit because, while evidently she would have liked even more to claim kin with that greater Southern hero, Stonewall Jackson, she could not and did not make any such claim.

Grandpa Moring had a sister, Eliza (my mother was named for her), who married Matthew Yates, a well-known Baptist missionary to China who is said to have translated the Bible "into Chinese."

Grandpa himself was apprenticed and educated to be a buggy-maker and was long part-owner of a small shop in Asheboro. After he lost out in business, or was cheated out (to hear him tell it) by one of his partners, he drove the mail to High Point or Greensboro and occasionally made a buggy just the same. We had no railroad until 1889.

None of the Moring name are left in Asheboro, or anywhere else that I know of; although the blood flows on under many names.

One side of what is now the principal business street of Asheboro, all the way from Fayetteville Street to Park, is on Grandpa's old home-place, and I used to help him pick up pine knots for kindling about where the Alexanders now live. The town of Asheboro has, within my memory, grown from a population of three hundred and fifty to eight thousand.

My mother had been engaged to a young man of Montgomery County who died suddenly and left her at loose ends.



She told me once that she never would have thought of marrying my father, who was twenty-five years her senior, if Mrs. Jackson-Walker-Moffitt, widow of that law-partner before-mentioned, and after that widowed by two other men, had not "put the idea into her head." Mrs. Walker-Moffitt, as we usually shortened it, had a strong personality, was a warm friend and admirer of my father, and continued to have business with him connected with properties inherited from Governor Worth as long as M.S.R. lived, or nearly so. I visited her in Richmond, Va., in 1915, and heard from her much in appreciation of the strong character of Marmaduke Robins. A sister of hers was mother of Josephus Daniels' wife. I do not believe my mother ever repented her marriage. But it was probably one of those marriages of common sense, rather than of youthful romance. Maybe something like the European type of marriage.

During the war or in the days not too long after, my father bought what may have once been the nearest thing to a real "plantation" very near Asheboro, the old Alfred H. Marsh place. The land was all worn out by that time. Mother said that when she came there a row of negro cabins ran down into the field behind the house. I can well remember, in fact still fondly recall, two enormous black-heart cherry trees which she said once stood at the door of some of those cabins. But the cabins were gone when I came along. The kitchen was separated from the house by a real flight of steps, and the cook's quarters were beyond the kitchen. We boys were all born and raised on this place, almost exactly on the spot where my brother's house now stands. He replaced the old winged house, with the two outside stone chimneys and the breezes blowing under it, some thirty-five years ago. The fifty-three acres that we had now show a hundred or so modern homes and a church. The swimming-hole where we and half of old Asheboro learned to swim, and which the darkeys used to borrow for an occasional baptizing, is now invisible or lost, plainly the victim of mild landscaping operations up and down the old branch.

A great-granddaughter of Alfred Marsh is now Mrs. De-Roulhac Hamilton, whose husband is emeritus professor of history at the University, and whose portrait I saw presented to the library there last winter. Mrs. Hamilton and I talk old Asheboro when we meet.



When my father died in 1905, of cancer starting in the root of an old tooth, it was suggested by friends that one of us boys ought to make available a biographical sketch. They said he had been a stout figure in Randolph County, was an example of a self-made man; and that many people would find pleasure and inspiration in his story. At the time I lacked the inclination or sufficient interest. I had gone from the University to Harvard, where Horace Williams had got me a scholarship "to study philosophy and theology." My father had seen no good to come of that. To him, philosophy was an awfully vague subject. He wanted me to join him and Henry in the practice of law. He would not help me, and I had to borrow some money from Uncle Will Moring. I don't mean that I fail to see his point, for I do. My own point is simply that I was wondering too much about my own place in the world, and that my mind was turned inward too much to be interested in digging up the past. My brothers had their reasons too, of course. So it happens that the period when help from his living contemporaries was available has gone by. The only sketch of his life written is a sort of memorial in the University Magazine for October, 1905, from the pen of Nathan W. Walker, then a professor at "The Hill," who had been at one time principal of the Asheboro Schools. He has a few facts which I did not know.

Mr. Walker notes M.S.R.'s frequent service in the state legislature, and mentions that he was for a short time Speaker of the House in the session of 1862. That was his first session. In the editorial field, and in addition to service on the **Daily Conservative**, of Raleigh, Mr. Walker says that he was the first editor of **The Randolph Regulator**, which was founded in Asheboro in 1876 and which later became **The Asheboro Courier**. We may assume that the original name of that paper was not suggestive in 1876 of medicinal or governmental regulators, but of the kind led by Herman Husbands in 1771.

Mr. Walker also gives quotations from editorials in the **Courier**, W. C. Hammer, editor; and the **Raleigh News and Observer**, Josephus Daniels, editor, upon the death of M.S.R. in 1905.

The **Courier** said, in part:

"Mr. Robins was the soul of honor, a gentleman of the highest character and integrity, an able, learned, painstaking lawyer, whose practice was not only large and lucrative in



this immediate section, but until his health failed him, in the counties of Moore, Montgomery and Stanly, where for thirty years he attended the courts as regularly as he did the courts of his own county.

"He lived through the days of reconstruction and carpet-baggism, and was merciless in his exposure of wrong and excoriation of the bad men who at times held the reins of power. . . . Never did he mince matters, but was plain, outspoken and fearless.

"Mr. Robins was a man of strong personality and individuality in character. He lived through troublous times. He was of strong, honest, sincere convictions, with strong likes and dislikes, loyal and true to his friends."

The *News and Observer* said:

"No honester man has lived in North Carolina than Marmaduke Robins, who died in Asheboro yesterday. He had lived a long and useful life. As a lawyer of the old school he had transacted business for many of the Randolph citizens for half a century. Their confidence in his integrity was perfect. He was an able lawyer, had mastered the learning of his great calling, and illustrated its best traditions.

"Mr. Robins was old fashioned in his adherence to the simple virtues, plain living, plain speaking, and direct manner. He hated shams and indirection and had no use for shiftiness or for deceit or for extravagance. He never changed his manner of life, and the new fashions in dress or in opinions had no effect upon him.

"During the administration of Governor Vance he held a position in the state government and lived in Raleigh. While in this city he was a diligent student and hard worker. . . . He wrote much after the war for a conservative paper published in Raleigh. He wrote and spoke in epigrams and his logic was faultless.

"The memory of Mr. Robins will always remain a part of the best history of Randolph County. He was in ability, in simple living, in rugged integrity, in plainness of speech, in faith in work, hatred of shams and contempt of extravagance, the best type of the virtues that have characterized the men of Randolph in all its history."

It does not seem that I want to undertake any further



encomiums upon my father. That is not a son's job. Perhaps however it will be worth while to speak of his familiar characteristics and idiosyncrasies, some of which we boys knew better than anybody.

Central in our whole outlook lies the fact that we never exactly knew him as an ordinary father, or dad. Mother made us call him "Papa" and her "Mama," but I have always hated that. Marrying at the age he did, he inevitably seemed more like a grandfather than a father. No doubt we sometimes mistook for peculiarities what were just signs of his having passed the meridian. He was through with a lot of kinds of fun when we came along, such things as going fishing or playing a little home-baseball. It seemed to us boys that he read, read, read, all the time he was home. Of an evening he had his sacred rocking-chair under the hanging lamp, in front of the fireplace; and there he read until twelve o'clock or later every night during our earliest years. We were taught to keep still and to communicate with one another in whispers. He must have had wonderful eyes, and he came to have "second sight." That is to say, finally he abandoned the glasses he had been addicted to all his life and read again with the naked eye. To be sure, after that he did not read so much.

His library was generally recognized to be much the best in town. It was loaded with great sets of the "works" of the founding-fathers: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison. He read these sets through time and again. I recall how he would lovingly touch the covers of his copy of "**Elliott's Debates and Madison Papers.**" There was a stout array of histories. Religion was well represented and he had those gigantic sets of the **Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christian Fathers**, and ploughed through them more than once. I had the gumption even then to wonder. I do not know that he never skipped, but I doubt it. He had the full sets of many of the great novelists: Scott, Thackery, Dickens, George Eliot, Bulwer-Lytton. I remember his reading the last two sets, which he came by late in life. But I do not think he re-read stories, the way I do if I like them. He had a shelf of the poets which he got volume by volume and went through methodically. He especially liked Edmund Spenser's **Faerie Queen**. He owned Shakespeare and had a good many quotations in familiar use. The Britannica was there. For science, much the weakest field, he yet had Darwin's famous works and



volumes of Huxley and Tyndall. The law library was at his office.

He probably read more in the field of religion and Christian history than in any other except law. In fact he bought so many religious books that publishers and book-stores sometimes addressed him as "Reverend" or "D.D." On one of these occasions I recall his saying: "Faugh, I had rather be called 'dog' than 'Reverend'." My children will think I inherited my dislike of this title from him. But I venture to think he may have had the same feeling about it that I always had: that "reverend" is a good English adjective, and it is a pity to take it in vain, or to risk doing so. My feeling is that we ought to wait and see how good and pious (those two words ought to mean the same thing) a man is, before we hand out the title to him. In other words, I rather think both my father and I have always felt that you should not set a man up too high just because of his profession. I know he was averse to judging people by their position, or the office they held, or their brass buttons, or by their piety apart from stout character. This feeling about the title of "Reverend" may have been a prejudice going back, on the religious side, to the fact that the Hardshell Baptists, among whom he grew up, did not have a settled ministry. Or it may have been partly, as in my case, a kind of individualism which is resistant to many of the common features which seem to go with usual forms of religious organization. He was not a good organization-man, not a wheel-horse.

For many years he taught a men's class in the Methodist Sunday School. And once, either because we were misbehaving or because he thought we weren't learning enough, he took Henry and me into his class. We sat there very silent while those old men were discussing St. Paul's epistles. I remember that one Sunday the question was whether God's "foreknowledge" of everything, including whether we were finally to arrive at heaven or hell, made Him responsible for where we went. The class was plainly unwilling to think it did. I do not recall that the teacher's view stood out in any way. But even then, I think, it seemed to me that when you add God's supposed "foreknowledge" to the fact of his creatorship, to the fact of his having made even Father Adam the way he was made, the ordinary pious defense was a bit weak.

His taking us into that valetudinarian Sunday School class



reminds me of his taking us out of day-school once for a whole year. It was when Henry was getting ready for the University, and our father felt that the head of the high school was not the man to give the needed instruction in Latin and Greek. So he undertook to teach us those two subjects himself. We read Vergil and started first-year Greek under him. I recall that he seemed to know the principal parts of every Latin verb in the deck. On Greek he was a little weaker. But he had taught both of those subjects in country schools some fifty years before. And the head of the high school didn't pass his examination.

There is a qualification to the story of our father's obsession with reading, at the fireside. In the first place, as he grew older and towards that period of second-sight, his eyes tired more and more easily. And he loved to play cards, especially Whist, the ancestor of Bridge. And so when we boys began to get big enough, he taught us to play Whist and half a dozen other games: Seven-Up, Euchre, California Jack, High Five, Pedro. This diversion came in the hour after supper, or when our studying was done and he got tired of reading. Sometimes one of us was sent for Grandpa Moring, who by this time lived next-door in a house belonging to our father: that always meant Seven-Up. To hear Mother tell it, it was the Methodist Church Discipline, which forbade cards and had nine-tenths of Asheboro intimidated, which had put her out of the field before we came into it. However I have always suspected that the real reason in her case, as in that of so many others, might have been that she was not so very good at Whist. For Father took his Whist very seriously, demanding whole-hearted attention to it. After Duke got big enough, we had a Whist team in the family all the same. And sometimes, during Court week, one or more of us even played with the Judge or some lawyer from away, to help make a quartet.

M.S.R. had many familiar sayings which came out at the card-table. At Whist, he frequently declared that there were just two excuses for not returning a partner's lead: being dead or having none of the suit. When somebody tried to belittle a mistake, he would say: "A miss is as good as a mile," or "If the dog had not stopped to drink he would have caught the rabbit." Getting ready to make a coup, he had a saying supposed to be from a "Dutchman" trying to speak English, which sounded to me like "Ash petterash koot." It was after



I had studied German that it occurred to me the "Dutchman" was supposed to be giving a rendering of "As better as good."

Oscar Coffin, who got into some of these games after Henry and I were off to college, and also worked on the farm at some of those occasional jobs, such as haying, that we boys were in demand for, recalls a dressing-down he once got for not coming by at end of day for his wages. We always had a hired man on the place, Clark Hooker, Tom Sledge, Frank Robbins — Frank much the longest period. Whoever it was got paid by the day, and I don't mean the week. M.S.R. had early contracted a horror of being in debt to any man, and money owing to another literally burned a hole in his pocket. He would have been the last man on this planet to sell anything to on the installment plan. The idea would have given him the horrors. He may have seen people in debt when he was a boy and reacted violently, just as many others do to the spectacle of a drunkard in the family or close around. My brother thinks the reaction was to the general ruin and bankruptcy which in the South followed the Civil War.

When he came home from attending Court in some other county, Father usually brought a bottle of good-smelling corn whiskey. About as soon as old Frank, our roan horse, was unhitched from the buggy, Grandpa Moring would be sent for. He would wind up what he was doing and come at a trot. There would be drinks on the back porch. Dad took his straight, with water following. Grandpa wanted a little mint and sugar in his and called it toddy. I don't think there was ever an occasion of my witnessing this ritual on which I was not offered a taste. Father said he didn't want us boys to form any false romantic notions on the subject. Was this one way of heading off a "complex"? His system has worked very well with his particular three boys, so far as I know.

However, perhaps I ought to say that Mother worked on just the opposite system. She used to make scuppernong wine and blackberry wine; but none of it did we boys get unless we were sick, and precious little then. I remember sampling the supplies on the sly a time or two, something I am quite sure I never did with Father's stores. I don't know whether that was a difference in the handling of us or an original difference in the personal awe I felt for my two parents, the one over against the other. Mother also put up brandy-peaches occasionally, and I remember expostulating with her when





**Annie Moring Robins**

1853-1928



she would get out a saucer-full of them for Uncle Will Moring but passed me by entirely. That memory adds a romantic glow to the brandy peaches I see on the store-shelf today, and maybe it is just as well I can't afford them. She took the view that such things were for adults and not for boys. Maybe here was a difference between my father's Hardshell Baptist upbringing and her Methodist one. Old Susannah Wesley, John Wesley's mother, and John himself, and the Methodist discipline, are not exactly democratic in outlook. Susannah said the first thing to do for a boy was to "break his will," and John quotes that a time or two in his journals.

Father's uncle, Editor William Swaim, had been one of the Anti-Bank men in North Carolina during the Jacksonian era. Banks were not on any sound foundation or well-regulated system when my father was growing up. Once I saw him buy a farm (I think the price was just two thousand dollars) and pay for it entirely in gold coin, bringing tight rolls of it out of the stout iron safe that stood in the back-room of his office. It was the most gold I ever saw at one time. All his money went into poor Randolph farms, and at one time he owned five of these, let out to tenants. It was a poor way of increasing money, but to his prejudices it was the safe thing. His friends have said that if he had turned over some of his fees to Dr. Worth or another friend, to invest in those Deep River cotton mills that were coming along, he would have died a rich man. When he died Asheboro had possessed for some years a bank which has become known as one of the soundest and most conservative institutions of the state. It has been under the hands of W. J. Armfield, Jr., from its very founding to this moment at which I am writing. But that bank meant little to Marmaduke Robins. He kept a very small cash account there for convenience but always insisted upon dealing with Mr. Armfield personally when he went there to deposit or draw. And when he died, the administrator found fifteen hundred dollars in gold in his safe.

As just indicated, he died without making a will. I believe he had told someone that the law would send his property about where he wanted it to go anyhow. So perhaps that was not peculiar for a lawyer.

He wore a  $7\frac{1}{2}$  hat and many times, as you might realize, had difficulty in getting fitted. As I recall him, he practically always wore a stiff, high crowned hat, with rounded top or edges. It was a plug-hat but not quite a "beaver."



Since left-handedness is a distinct piece of inheritance, it may interest my two "southpaw" sons (John and Ralph), to know that my father was left-handed. To be sure he had early been forcefully drilled into using his right hand for writing, and he kept that up. Apparently this left-handedness has skipped a generation, unless it be that a certain ambidexterity developed by my brother Henry, particularly in throwing a baseball, is a point to the contrary. I believe he thinks he developed that himself. But not only did it at the time seem to me a thing impossible to learn; but it now seems that the other boys would not let you throw the ball so many awkward ways as would have been necessary for most people to throw it while trying to learn something so unnatural.

. He was generally thought to be homely and very frequently remarked upon as resembling Abraham Lincoln. He even got that comment once behind the Yankee lines when on a trip to see one of his wounded brothers who, I believe, was captured and later exchanged. Chin-whiskers without moustache may have had something to do with the Lincoln suggestion, as general rugged appearance certainly did. There is a story about his homeliness. Joshua Bean was another Asheboro lawyer who ran for the legislature on the Republican ticket as often as my father ran on the Democratic. At Carthage Court, a man asked how to recognize Marmaduke Robins, as he wanted him on business. He was told: "Go into the court-room, pick out the ugliest lawyer in the bar, and that will be Mr. Robins." The man went and picked out Josh Bean. Josh was homely enough too. He had to listen on the stump to that story more than once.

There is one picture in the family album showing my father wearing a black bow-tie. It may be painted in, or it may be fruit of one brief moment, perhaps shortly after marriage, during which my mother got him to wear a necktie. As I remember him, he always wore a stiff-bosomed white shirt, without any tie. At least in older age he despised all man-made fashions, at least all new ones. He was probably the last man in Asheboro to wear full-length knee-boots underneath his pants.

Besides not being exactly a good organization-man, he was somewhat prickly in personal relationships. In the legislature he soon got the name of "watch-dog of the treasury," a



sobriquet they do not hand out to a fellow who is fully "one of the boys." You have noted that it was during his very first term that he was Speaker for a while. In the correspondence he left behind I found years ago a letter from a Greensboro lawyer and old associate, deeply offended at my father's reply to his request for support for a judgeship or for Congress, I forget which. M.S.R. had refused, saying that he thought the office ought to seek the man and not the man the office.

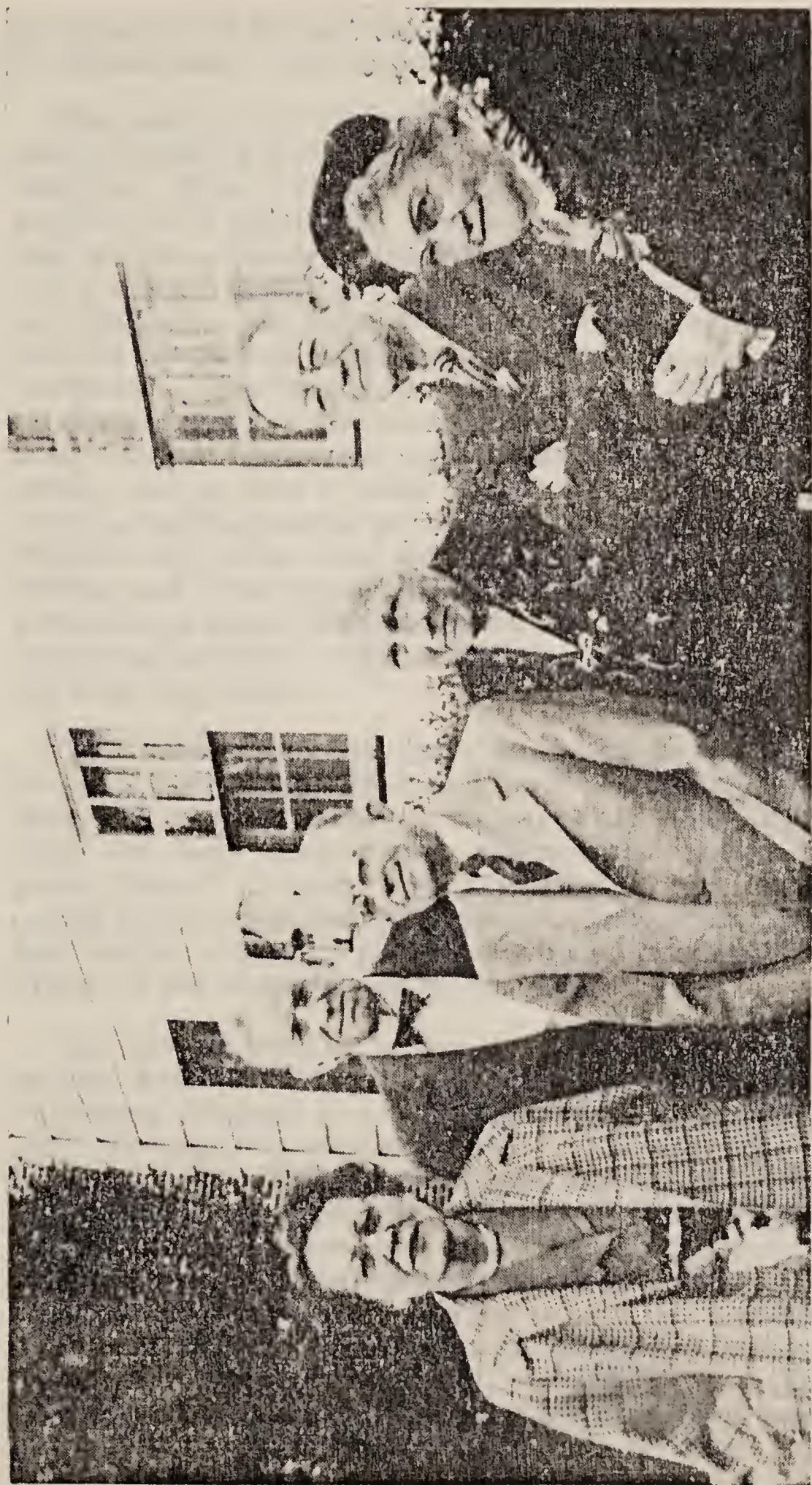
He never joined any church, and he stopped attending my mother's, and stopped teaching that class in the Sunday School there, when they posted a list showing how much each member was expected to contribute for church expenses and preacher's salary. He got as far as the church-entry that day, but, upon seeing the notice, turned around and went home muttering the name of Uncle Joe Betts, and what he was supposed to pay. Mr. Betts was our chief grave-digger. Father never personally darkened the door of any church again, though they buried his body from that one.

He had been a Mason at some early period of his life, and kept apron and regalia in a drawer; but, except possibly for funerals, I think never attended a Masonic meeting after I got big enough to notice such things.

He lived to be seventy-eight. When he died my brothers and I consulted with our mother about what to put on his tomb-stone, along with name and dates. We finally hit on the phrase "*integer vitae.*" That suggested integrity and having the root of the matter and the deciding principle within yourself. And I would not change it if it were to do over.

And now to speak a little about my mother. This is a topic on which I am neither as ready nor as able to speak as about my father. I stand a little further off from him both in age and in memory. Mother, who died in 1928, had outlived him twenty-three years. From her marriage in 1878, she always made her home on the old Marsh-Robins place in Asheboro, in later years with Henry and his wife; but she often visited me in my wanderings. She spent a whole year with me in Kingston, Massachusetts, before I was married. She was at my marriage to Frances Shippen Lord on June 5, 1917, in old Plymouth. She visited us several times in Ann Arbor, the last time being the summer of 1928, the one before





Mary Sidney Duke Frances  
Henry Maggie Lee  
Christmas Day, 1952



my going in the fall into teaching and before her own death at Christmas-time. Anne and John may remember her vaguely.

She was one of the most sociable people in the world, making friends galore wherever she went, and keeping up with many of them. The presence of people made her gay, excited her to small-talk. Northern strangers found warmth and Southern charm in her manners. She was eminently a "good mixer," though of the gentle as over against the smashing approach. She loved her friends deeply, and inclined to like and sympathize with almost everyone. She was a thoughtful person. She taught me never to say "Nigger." I do think she felt a little bit strange with every one of us rather silent Robins boys. She often stood between me and my father though, and I think usually went out of the room when he had sent me to get a switch for personal application. Perhaps the others could say the same. She was a devoted mother and I am not good at expressing feelings in words. I often catch myself wishing she could be present to help enjoy something beautiful. That is one way of saying her spirit is not dead but liveth.

The *Asheboro Courier* gave her a whole column on its front page, referring to her as a landmark among Asheboro's older citizens. It goes on to say "her unusually active mind and body made her a congenial companion for the young folks." I want to qualify the first part of that by saying that she was definitely not physically strong, although she had the ability to rise to any social excitement or adventure. Her strength was of the spirit.

The *Courier* goes on to say that when called upon in the various clubs of which she was a member, she "could relate interesting incidents in a most humorous and delightful manner." Perhaps it seemed so to others. But either the *Courier* is adding a little lustre derived from her paternal family, or else I am being bothered by comparisons. Her brother, Will Moring, and her sisters, Mag Anderson and Ida Coffin, were all three famous story-tellers and reconteurs, able not only to see the humorous side of trifles but to give the most hilarious account of their minor travels. In comparison at least, my mother definitely lacked this gift, although she had the sense of humor. I find that she collected and filed good anecdotes, just as I do and just as she filed the names of casual acquaintances from her trips.



This from the **Courier** is certainly by the hand of an old friend: "The earliest recollection of Annie Moring was that of the school-room, the church; and at any public gathering she was the life of the group. Delightful in personality, pleasing in manner and cheery in disposition, she scattered sunshine where there were shadows, . . . . She had the happy faculty of extending thought and kindness through little things . . . possessed a gentle spirit and an individual way of doing beautiful things for her friends and neighbors."

"Her flower-garden, in which she took such a pride and delight, was a beauty-spot on her street, and in many yards and gardens of the town are plants that the owners tell you came from 'Miss Annie's' garden."

Her garden was a nice old-fashioned one, as things went in Asheboro, and it is much mingled with my earliest thoughts. She made me draw and tote water for it though, in the summer-time, until I am afraid it did something adverse to my sentiments about cultivated gardens. I am all for wild flowers and sights, where they grow or happen to your surprise. Of course it is nice to spot some plants around a bit in places where they will do the work of growing without much help. But if nature and God are willing to do it all, so much the better. Mother also loved wild nature more than most people very well can. I shall never forget her rapture over the New England winter in Kingston — standing at the window of a morning and clapping her hands like a child at the world outside, deep snow or ice on pointed firs and mighty elms, the Christmas chromo come true. In coming to Ann Arbor of a spring, she would rave about the Judas-trees (red-bud) along the railroads. Here is something which marks a bigger agreement, over against the disagreement about flower gardens. I for one have inherited from some source a love of wild nature as one of the deepest passions and resources, and I suspect that it is partly or even largely through her. The poets I have really loved so far are Wordsworth and Emerson. And if any of you have the same mystical feeling about unspoiled forests, or brown leaves on a hill side; or think a snow-storm is the best time of all to get out in the woods; or have the same craving in travel to "see first what the Indians saw": then you will know what I am talking about and know where you probably got some of it.

I give you a few more dates for your record: My elder



brother, Henry Moring Robins, was born on the 19th of July, 1880; I was born on the 21st of July, 1883; our younger brother, Marmaduke (without the "Swaim," it having previously been handed to me), was born November 28, 1887, and died in February, 1953.

In conclusion, I want to say that I am well aware that my own children have a more distinguished or well-known ancestry through their mother than through me. But that record is better preserved, in less danger of being lost than the one I could give you a little account of, as I have done. It seems that no family at least, whether the same can be said of the individual or not, can be anything just of and by itself, so as to claim all the credit. It sort of seems that my father needed help from that good Cedar Falls citizen to get him to Chapel Hill, and that was certainly a turning point in his life. But every family, in every generation, has to borrow a whole half of itself from some other family. As already suggested, it may possibly be that the very best thing we know about the Robins family, up to the time of my father anyhow, is that it had the gumption and the persuasiveness to marry twice into the Swaims. For the Swaims put forth a number of sturdy sprouts. Our story then is not exactly celebration of a name but a contribution to knowledge of that "block from which we were hewn." Whoever you are, I hope you have an ambition of your own. But if the story above happens to be a part of your ancestral story, as it is of mine, I assume that none of us want to let down, any more than we have to, any of the Robinses, the Swaims, the Morings, the Lords, or the Shippens. And whether any of us may add a candle-power to the glow of any or all of them is not for us to say, though the idea of it is a nice one. Amen.

Chapel Hill, N. C.

February, 1955.

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