

Slave's talent won praise, but no freedom

CHATHAM'S Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



This month's saga begins in Northhampton County, around the year 1797. A slave woman owned by William Horton, Sr. presented her five daughters with a baby brother who was named George Moses. His master was proprietor of a modest tobacco farm and owned eight slaves. The repeated planting of tobacco soon exhausted the soil and in 1800 William Horton Sr. moved to Chatham County. His new farm had fertile, virgin soil and was located on the heights between the Haw River and New Hope Creek. Only nine miles from Pittsborough, the county capital, and eight miles from New Hope Chapel, later to become known as Chapel Hill, the farm was ideal for marketing, social and political contacts.

Young George Moses was put to work in the fields at an early age and found himself humming as he worked. In mid-life he recalled his childhood and said, "I was early fond of music with an extraordinary appetite for singing lively tunes."

He loved to hear people reading aloud, especially school children, and got hold of discarded pieces of old spelling books and hymnals. George

Moses learned to recognize the names and sounds of the alphabet by listening to others read, especially school children.

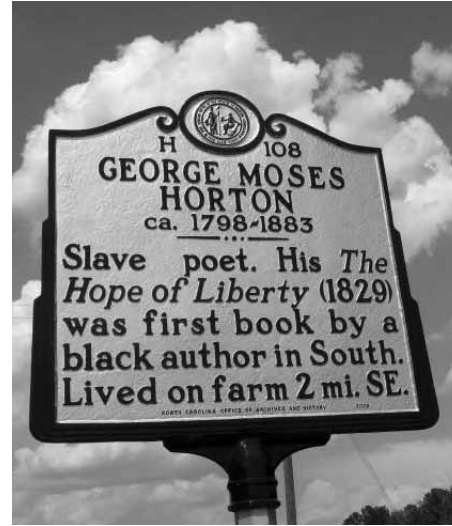
He graduated from working in the fields to cow-boy, and spent about ten years driving cows to and from pastures which gave him time to practice reciting things that he had heard. On the Sabbath George would find a shady, lonely spot to practice syllables, sometimes forgetting to show up for meals. At night he would read by firelight, eventually reading parts of the New Testament, Wesley's old hymns, and bits and pieces of poetry. The latter struck his fancy, complimenting his love of singing. Playmates scorned his efforts and tried to get him to go fishing instead. They felt that in view of their slave status, all George's efforts to educate himself were in vain.

As he got older and stronger George graduated from cow-boy to working behind a plow in the fields. This task gave him time to set his own words to old tunes.

William Horton, the master, wasn't particularly interested in his own children's schooling, no less that of his slaves. Master Horton apparently enjoyed alcohol and according to George Moses' later remembrances, sometimes even gave his slaves a dram. The result was lewd, licentious behavior and profanity all around young George, which disgusted him.

George Moses married a slave of

Franklin Snipes, but she was far below his intellectual level and it was not a happy union. Eventually, William Horton gave George Moses to his son James, who was not a hard man. The slave worked alongside James' own sons in the fields. When George Moses reached the age of 19



or 20 James allowed him to take plantation products to Chapel Hill to sell, even though it was against the law to permit "dealing and trafficking" by slaves. George had to pay James 25 cents for a day away from the plantation.

The visits to Chapel Hill brought George into contact with the students who were soon impressed by his verbal and reading skills. Some students gave him books about grammar, diction and geography. His later year remembrances listed some of these students which included impressive

names such as Leonidas Polk, A. Rencher, Augustus Alston, William Hardin and Samuel Horton.

Soon George Moses Horton was composing love poems for lonesome students to send to their sweethearts. These sold for 25 cents each, with a 50 cent price for more elaborate pieces. In the mid-1820's a student often had only one dollar monthly for pocket money, which makes their payment of these pieces quite remarkable. George Moses once wrote that he had "composed love pieces in verse for courtiers from all parts of the state, and acrostics on the names of the tip-top belles of Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia."

The talented slave soon was noticed by a UNC modern languages teacher, Nicholas M. Hentz and his poet wife Caroline Lee Hentz. Professor Hentz was French born and he and Mrs. Hentz were not socially accepted by the mostly Calvinist faculty members. Consequently they devoted much of their free time to reviewing George's literary output. Years later he recalled how useful their constructive criticism of his poetic work and grammatical usage had been.

Mrs. Hentz sent a story about George Moses Horton, along with two of his poems about slavery to the Lancaster, Mass. Gazette. Furthermore, she introduced him to Joseph Gales, a

SLAVE POET continued on page 10.

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