

Uncovering a Person's Story: Edward R. "Ned" Rawls

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In the 1889 photograph of North Carolina's House of Representatives, Edward R. "Ned" Rawls holds seat number 118. One can still view this seat in the State Capitol's House Chamber. But exactly who was Ned Rawls? Primary sources like documents and oral history can help us put together the story of this pioneering black Republican from Northampton County.

Rawls was born into slavery near the community of Garysburg, in western Northampton County, around 1856. Many local people referred to the community by its American Indian designation: Occoneechee. This was a smaller tribe originally located in present-day southern Virginia, along the headwaters of the Roanoke River. The Occoneechee had been forced to move below the river's swamps into North Carolina after English settlement spread from Jamestown, Virginia. The community where Rawls was born made up the eastern part of what used to be termed the "Old Tobacco Belt" or "Border Tobacco Belt." Many of the planters who settled this region migrated from Virginia, bringing their slaves to clear and sometimes tap pine forests for naval stores; later burley, or shortleaf, tobacco became a major crop. By 1860 the counties in this border belt included Northampton, Halifax, Warren, Granville, Person, Caswell, Rockingham, and Stokes. The 1860 census for Northampton County listed 6,804 enslaved persons out of a total population of 13,372.

Many enslaved people in this region during the late antebellum period were field hands who basically worked as tobacco farmers on their owners' plantations. In addition to growing tobacco, the enslaved farmers transported their harvest to the markets. (The largest market was located along an old trading path that led to Petersburg, Virginia, which is now paved as Interstate 95. A smaller one was located in Henderson in present-day Vance County.) So these slaves had to understand exchange rates for various grades of tobacco.

From studying the tobacco markets of that time, we can understand how Ned Rawls could have had some degree of literacy. He probably learned reading and math skills from his father, George Rawls. According to the 1870 federal census, the Rawls family was listed as "farmers" in the Old Tobacco Belt. More detailed information in that census shows George Rawls as a "farm laborer" at age sixty and Ned's mother, Mariah, as "keeping house." The census includes his siblings, Lucy (age twenty-two) and George Jr. (fifteen), as "farm laborers." Curiously, Ned and his younger sister, Sarah, are listed as "at home."

We cannot glean much more information from early census records during Ned's lifetime because slaves were not allowed to be listed on the free schedule. The U.S. Constitution that North Carolina ratified in 1789 stated that African slaves and their descendants were to be

counted as three-fifths of a human being. In fact, the census did not even mention enslaved persons until several special “schedules” were created in 1850 as material added to the free population schedule. You can find this information at the back of the large census volumes arranged by county at the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh. Starting in 1850 the slave schedules list enslaved people—by “age, sex, and color,” not by name—under the names of their slaveholders.

Beyond basic written history, what does a term like “at home” mean in the 1870 census? Youngsters like Ned would have been required to perform lighter tasks during slavery. When African Americans gained their freedom after the Civil War, they could legally learn reading, writing, and mathematics. According to oral and family history, this is about the time that Ned enrolled at the South’s oldest historically black college: Shaw University, founded in 1865 in the state capital of Raleigh. He would have been among the first generation of graduates there. The college at Shaw also served as a high school until the eve of World War I. With limited space, Shaw would have selected the best and brightest prospective students. According to interviews of family descendants, young Rawls graduated and employed himself as a teacher of the freedmen. Shaw University was distinct in its role of promoting education and social etiquette, especially in northeastern North Carolina during the Reconstruction period.

By the 1880s, Rawls had the distinction of being a leader in his community. In an effort to help his community continue to move from slavery to freedom, he decided to enter politics. Undoubtedly, Rawls’s education and understanding of the demographics of his native county spurred such interest. For example, data from the 1874 *North Carolina Manual* lists Northampton County with 1,838 “colored” voters and 1,315 “white” voters. By the time of the 1880 presidential election, the *North Carolina Republican* newspaper shows that Northampton County voted overwhelmingly for Republican gubernatorial candidate H. P. Paxton, with 2,041 votes compared to 1,215 for Democratic governor-elect Thomas J. Jarvis. For certain, Northampton polled as a solid Republican county. With strong local backing, Rawls placed his name on the 1884 ballot for the legislature. Information from the interviews of Rawls’s descendants suggests Reconstruction-era voting trickery in Northampton County. With further research at the State Archives, we find that charge supported. Information from the original legislative hearing on the contested election for the seat that Rawls sought appears in the *General Assembly Session Records of 1884–1885*.

When Rawls arrived at the short session of January through March 1885, he discovered that he was not the only “black Republican” to protest the shady elections of 1884. Another duly elected Republican, Morris Corbett, of Caswell County, was also protesting. The Democratic counterpart from Corbett’s county literally beat him to Raleigh—and was seated. The original transcripts of both trials can be found in the *General Assembly Session Records, January–March 1885*. Corbett won his contested seat with roughly a week left in the session. But his photograph does not appear with the other representatives from that session; his Democratic rival’s portrait is included. Rawls lost his contested election and was not seated. With a consolation of fifty dollars from the state, he vowed to return.



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and Senators and Representatives in the General Assembly,
County of Northampton, North Carolina.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY, Senatorial District.	REPRESENTATIVES IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.			
	<i>James H. Kennedy</i>	<i>James H. Grant</i>	<i>George W. Barber</i>	<i>Ned R. Rawls</i>
	37	37	139	139
	159	174	245	252
	116	114		
	188	186		
	91	90	43	40
	142	142	5	4
	112	115	160	140
	121	123	57	57
	174	169	145	144
	189	189	158	159
	94	93	74	74
	241	237		
	64	64		
	1728	1733	1026	1019

State Records like this one show the vote totals of past elections. Ned Rawls protested the outcome of the 1884 race for the legislature. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

Not all was lost for Rawls in 1885. On Christmas Day that year, he married the lovely Alice Ransom, the daughter of Matthew Whitaker Ransom—a white U.S. senator, Confederate general, and minister to Mexico from Warren County—and his enslaved servant, Emma, as acknowledged in family history.

Rawls did eventually serve three terms representing Northampton County as a legislator in 1887, 1889, and 1897. He is one of 123 known black Republicans to serve the Tar Heel State in this way during the Reconstruction period of 1868–1901. This period ended in 1901 with the “colored” people again losing the right to vote and with a political and social climate that had become increasingly hostile to African Americans.

Rawls retired to farming and timber work in and around Garysburg. He died August 4, 1929, with his family at his side. His death certificate was filed with the newly created North Carolina Health Department in Volume 1319, Page 187: 1929 deaths. In addition to his death certificate, local researchers can find his marriage license through the office of the Northampton County Register of Deeds.

*At the time of this article’s publication, Earl Ijames was working as the curator of African American history at the North Carolina Museum of History. Michelle Lanier was the curator of cultural history for the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties (www.nchistoricsites.org). She also was serving as a member of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources’ Civil War 150 Committee. (See www.nccivilwar150.com for information.)

“I’m honored to be a part of him”: Reflections of a Descendant of Ned Rawls

Oral histories have become one kind of primary source that can help us understand personal connections to historic moments and characters. The following excerpts come from an oral history interview of Lisa Gladden, a descendant of Edward “Ned” Rawls, one of North Carolina’s Reconstruction-era African American lawmakers. As you will read, Gladden now serves as a state senator in Maryland. She used a number of primary sources to find out about her ancestor. Michelle Lanier, curator of cultural history for North Carolina’s State Historic Sites, conducted this interview on January 6, 2009.

Michelle Lanier: Senator Gladden, how have you been personally impacted by your connection to former representative Edward “Ned” Rawls, your great-great-grandfather?

Senator Lisa Gladden: Ned Rawls is a really important person in my life. His story pointed me in the right direction; hence, I’m sitting at the senate of the state of Maryland.

Just to tell you a little about him and about how I learned about him. . . . My mother always told me stories about her mother’s grandfather. He went to college, to Shaw University, right after slavery . . . around 1870. [My mother] was so interested in his life and history, but she didn’t know any of the facts. So I spent my time, from the age of ten, gathering information starting with the census track of 1880, and this started the process of telling me who his family members were and what he was doing at the time.

Then when I went to college, at Duke, I wrote my honors paper on Ned Rawls. Because his story . . . in essence, is a man born in slavery who became a math teacher for a community that was pretty much an old plantation in Occoneechee Neck. He went from slave to teacher to a representative in North Carolina. He taught math for years at the Gumberry School in Occoneechee Neck and represented Northampton County in 1887, ’89, and again in ’97. [He had a contested election for the 1885 seat.] And so I’m honored, I’m honored to be a part of him.

ML: How did you go about the research? You said you started at ten?

LG: Yes! I was ten years old. Both of my parents were schoolteachers. My mom taught history, and so she was always so fascinated with historic stories, and because I lived in Baltimore it was just a car-drive to Washington, D.C., to the National Archives. This was still pre-Internet, so you had to actually go to the U.S. census and get the record and get the microfilm and actually roll [through] to see it. In the 1850 and 1860 census, usually [enslaved] African Americans’ names were not listed [in the free schedule]. You may see “male, age 22” or “male, age 99” [in the slave schedule]. But usually you couldn’t figure out who your relatives were because they were listed in such crude ways.

In the 1870 census, which was the first complete census after slavery . . . I was able to find out exactly who Ned Rawls was. But the challenge was that figuring out who he was by the census

did not help me figure out who he was as a person. So I began to do oral histories in order to write my honors paper at Duke. I called it “At No Time in History.” At that time, in the 1880s, particularly in eastern North Carolina and especially in Halifax County—which is the next county over from Northampton County—blacks had lots of leadership roles. They were the sheriff, they were the land surveyor. Even so freshly out of slavery, they ran a lot of county as well as state government positions. This is why I called the paper “At No Time in History,” and I wrote particularly about Ned Rawls.

He died in 1929, so there were still some family members alive who had known him. I was very intrigued by what people who knew him said about Rawls and also what I found in primary documents. Through the research, I got a sense of how he looked and how he sounded. He was said to be very articulate.

ML: As I hear you talk about [this history], it sounds like it’s engraved in you. Can you tell me a little about the emotional experience of doing this work?

LG: It is! For instance, I discovered in the sketchbook for the 1885 House of Representatives a notation that Ned Rawls and Alice Ransom [daughter of General Matthew Whitaker Ransom] had gotten married Christmas Day in 1885. So I sent out cards in 1985 announcing their marriage. I wanted to acknowledge that they had been married a hundred years ago and that I was proud of them. So I am very connected to my history.

Going over it and looking at it again, you realize that these are the people who brought you to where you are today. I tell you what I did. I went to Ghana, to the place where many African Americans were transported into slavery, and I thanked my ancestors for being strong enough to withstand slavery and Jim Crow and segregation and all of the lost and missed opportunities that had been stolen from them. . . . I thank Ned Rawls for saying, “You can be a politician, because I did it.”

ML: Let’s talk a little about his connection between education and public service.

LG: In 1884 Rawls ran and lost but should not have lost. What happened was, after everyone went to the general store to vote, the black people’s ballots were marked and burned. Ned knew that and decided, at twenty-nine years old, to leave Occoneechee Neck and go down to Raleigh and sue the State of North Carolina—it’s in the archives [in Raleigh]. He was given fifty dollars [from the state], which was a lot of money in 1885. What he did was he put people on notice—“I’m coming back, and I will not allow you to do this to me again.” So the fact that he was educated helped. And he knew that he had to do something to ensure that black people had a voice in Raleigh. . . . His ability to fight on behalf of an entire community, I think, came from the fact that he was educated, that he went to Shaw University.

I don’t have all of the bills that he sponsored, but he did sponsor a bill in support of colored schools. He recognized the value of education, and he knew that it was going to be through state government that he was going to be able to do something.