

Mary Wife of Robert Walker Esq and Jesse Lester

By Fred Coffey

See: <http://www.coffey.ws/familytree/familynotes/MaryWifeOfRobert.pdf>

I descend from Robert Walker Esquire of Surry County, NC, and his first wife, through his son Robert Walker Jr.

Robert Esq. was married a second time, to a wife named "Mary", and had two additional children. Although Mary is not my ancestor, I found her story interesting.

Over time I have exchanged notes with Kathy Walker and Betty Hicks about Mary. Here is what I think we know:

In summary, I think Mary was born about 1750-55. She married Robert, possibly around 1777-82. (I think it was after 1776, because that is the apparent birth year for Robert's son David by his **first** wife.) Robert's will names two young children by her, Polly and Betsey. Robert's will was written March 1786, and proved August 1786. In that month Mary was granted leave to continue operating Robert's Tavern. She then married Jesse Lester on 20 May 1787, and Jesse assumed the tavern license, and became guardian of Robert's orphans. Jesse eventually became an "Esquire", thus assuming Robert Walker's political role.

In 1790 Surry County was split, and Richmond ceased to be a county seat. Jesse and Mary Lester moved to the new Surry County Seat in Rockford, building a new tavern. They had two additional children, Mary (abt 1790) and Sally (abt 1794). The "Jesse Lester Tavern" is still standing (needs refurbishing!) on Rockford Road, Rockford, NC. Jesse died 12 Dec 1815, Mary died April 1829.

Was she "Mary Prowell"?

There is a record of a Mary Prowell, marrying a Robert Walker:

North Carolina, Marriage Bonds, 1741-1868

<i>Name:</i>	<i>Mary Prowell</i>
<i>Gender:</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Spouse:</i>	<i>Robert Walker</i>
<i>Spouse Gender:</i>	<i>Male</i>
<i>Bond Date:</i>	<i>18 Aug 1775</i>
<i>Bond #:</i>	<i>000060622</i>
<i>Level Info:</i>	<i>North Carolina Marriage Bonds, 1741-1868</i>
<i>ImageNum:</i>	<i>006514</i>
<i>County:</i>	<i>Guilford</i>
<i>Record #:</i>	<i>03 463</i>
<i>Bondsman:</i>	<i>Colored Alex Martin</i>
<i>Witness:</i>	<i>Alex McClaran</i>

I think there is a CHANCE this is the right Mary and the right Robert. However “Robert Walker” and “Mary” are very common names, and there are a large number of family trees for various parts of North Carolina involving assorted “Roberts” who are claiming this marriage. They can’t all be right (but can all be wrong).

Are there any clues as to when Robert and Mary were married? As far as I can tell, we don’t actually know when Robert’s first wife died, or when he remarried. The earliest dated reference to his spouse that I have found is a Moravian Diary reference to “Mistress Walker from Richmond” dated July 20, 1779. That could be Mary, but MAYBE it refers to his first wife, who was still alive then? All it proves is that he was married to someone on that date.

The earliest explicit reference to “Mary” that I can find is as follows:

Surry Court Minutes, 13 May 1785

"Ordered: Sarah Brandon, orphan of Wm. Brandon, deceased, age seven years, be bound unto Robert Walker and his wife Mary, (to) learn mistery Spinster until 18 years and at her freedom be given feather bed, furniture, cow and calf."

We also have some vague hints from Robert’s will:

Robert Walker’s Will, dated March 1786:

"I further do will & bequeath unto my two young daughters Polly and Betsey by the last wife to them I give and bequeath to each of them three hundred acres of land on the East side of the Tennessee River next to their mothers land to them and their heirs forever.

"if any more children shall hereafter be born to me by my wife, they shall have and enjoy equal portion with those now mentioned of the last wife’s children"

We have evidence (discussed later) that one of these daughters, Betsey, was born in 1785. And Robert’s will refers to both as “young daughters”, and indicates a possibility that Mary might currently be pregnant. Perhaps Robert married Mary in the early 1780’s, and both young daughters were little more than infants when he wrote his will?

Mary and Robert Walker Esq:

The details of the life of Mary and Robert are already documented as follows:

<http://www.coffey.ws/FamilyTree/FamilyNotes/AboutRobertWalkerEsq.pdf>

Jesse Lester Background:

There are trees that purport to show his early background. The information I have found is not solidly documented, but I have taken it as given: He was born circa 1750 in Virginia or Pennsylvania. His first wife was Mary London, born about 1752, with marriage about 1768 in New Jersey. They had two children, Mollie (born abt 1768) and Thomas (born abt 1777). Wife Mary London died before 1787.

Mary Walker and Jesse Lester: Robert Walker was last active on the Surry court, and a census taker, in February 1786. His will was written in March, 1786, and I would guess he died in April or May. The Surry Court Minutes pick up the story as follows:

Surry Court Minutes: P96, 15 Aug 1786, Mary WALKER has leave to keep Tavern at her now dwelling.

Surry Court Minutes: P96, 16 Aug 1786, Will and testament of Robert WALKER, Esqr deceased, proved.

So Mary picks up the operation of Robert's tavern. Her marriage to Jesse Lester is reported about one year later, on **20 May 1787**. I have found no records for Jesse until AFTER that date, so we have no information on where and how she met him.

Surry Court Minutes: P123, 18 Aug 1787, Jesse LESTER has leave to keep Tavern at his now dwelling house.

Surry Court Minutes: 13 Nov 1787, "William CUPPLES and **Andrew JACKSON**, Esqrs. Produced license from Hon. Samuel ASHE and John WILLIAMS, Esqrs. Authorizing them as Attorneys."

What does this last entry have to do with Jesse & Mary Lester? This new lawyer presenting his credentials was indeed Andrew Jackson, then age 20, who would 40 years hence be elected the 7th president of the United States. Andrew had just completed his legal education less than two months earlier, and was really struggling to make a living as an attorney.

According to HistoryNet.com, there's a story that goes with the presence of Andrew: "During one of his travels to court in the town of Richmond, Jackson stayed at the inn of Jesse Lister, and apparently left without paying his bill. According to tradition, Lister later wrote in his account book that the charge was 'Paid at the Battle of New Orleans.' (Jackson as president would deny the validity of this story when presented with the board-bill by Lister's daughter.)"

Surry Court Minutes: P128, 17 Nov 1787, Jesse LESTER overseer, streets of Richmond;

Surry Court Minutes: P129, 17 Nov 1787, Jesse given keys to courthouse.

Surry Court Minutes: P131, 14 Feb 1788, Jesse LESTER appointed guardian to (blank & blank), orphans of Robert WALKER, deceased.

So after the marriage, Jesse soon becomes the license holder for the tavern, and becomes involved in helping manage the city of Richmond. But the item that absolutely ties him to Mary is his appointment as guardian of the orphans of Robert Walker, deceased. (The "blank & blank" children would be Robert Walker's daughters by Mary, "Polly and Betsey".)

Surry Court Minutes:

P138, 15 May 1788, Thomas POINDEXTER has leave to keep Tavern in Richmond, Jesse LESTER, security.

P146, 15 Aug 1788 Jesse LESTER (on committee report re Claims for reimbursement)

P151, Nov 1788, Jesse LESTER appointed committee to repair floor Courthouse.

P152, February 1789, Jesse LESTER qualified as Justice of the Peace.

P154, February 1789, Jesse LESTER appointed to committee settle estate of James GLENN.

P155, 11 May 1789, Present: Jesse LESTER, Esq.

P157, 14 May 1789, Jesse LESTER, gave deposition

P161, 12 Aug 1789, Jesse LESTER Esq. appointed committee

P162, 13 Aug 1789, Jesse LESTER received bill of sale from Joseph PHILLIPS

P163, 13 Aug 1789, lawsuit, Jesse LESTER vs Bazzle RIDDLE

P165, 14 Aug 1789, Jesse LESTER filed claim for repairing Court House Floor.

P167, 12 Nov 1789, Daniel LESTER appointed constable, Jesse LESTER security.

Above are the remaining records for Jesse in the court minutes. He moves up the political ladder, becoming an "Esquire" by May 1789. (I cannot figure out who is "Daniel Lester".)

In 1789 Surry County was split, with the eastern half becoming Stokes County. Richmond is on the Stokes County side, and in the 1790 census Jesse Lester is there. His household has 2 free white males 16 and over, 1 male under 16, 5 free white females, and 8 slaves. (I believe 2 of the females would be Mary's daughters by Robert Walker. And I suspect the extra male over 16 might be Robert's son James, and the male under 16 might be Robert's son David? Oh, one of the females might be orphan Sarah Brandon, who in 1785, at age 7, was bound to Robert and Mary until age 18.)

Robert's will named Mary, Robert Walker, and Col Martin Armstrong as executors of his will. Apparently the marriage gave Jesse Lester authority to act in the administrator role. Over the years 1790 to 1803 we find Jesse Lester acting in accord with either Robert Walker or Martin Armstrong to manage the estate of Robert Esq.

I also found the following reference in a tabulation of slavery activity in Stokes County, involving a purchase of slaves by Jesse:

Slaves in Stokes Co

*5 Nov 1791, John THOMMASON, Sr to **Jesse LESTER, Esq.** 577 pds, 5 negroes Dicy 32 y/o; Anthony 13 y/o; Sarah 9 y/o; Delpha 6 y/o; Jeffery 3 y/o.*

Richmond was no longer a convenient location, and the new Surry County Seat was designated in 1790 to be at Rockford. That is about 20 miles west of Richmond, upstream on the Yadkin River. Richmond was discontinued as a county seat, and soon abandoned. Jesse Lester obtained a license to operate a tavern in the new seat of Rockford. That tavern is still standing – tell Google maps to take you to “36.2682, -80.6484”, switch to street view, and look to the west. You will see this:



Jesse and Mary had two children, Mary born about 1790-91, and Sally born about 1794. The child Mary married James Fitzgerald. See Mary (Walker) Lester's will below for more detail on the children.

The family are found in the 1800 census as follows: (Memo: If Sally was born about 1794, there should be a female under age 10? Best guess is "census error", and the three females 10-15 are Betsey Walker, Mary Lester, and Sally Lester?)

Jesse Lester:

<i>Home in 1800 (City, County, State):</i>	<i>Salisbury, Surry, North Carolina</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Males - Under 10:</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Males - 10 thru 15:</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Males - 16 thru 25:</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Males - 26 thru 44:</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Males - 45 and over:</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Females - 10 thru 15:</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Free White Persons - Females - 45 and over:</i>	<i>1 (Mary, thus born in or before 1755.)</i>
<i>Number of Slaves:</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Number of Household Members Under 16:</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Number of Household Members Over 25:</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Number of Household Members:</i>	<i>31</i>

And in 1804 Jesse Lester was a bondsman for a marriage:

<i>Name:</i>	<i>Betsey Walker</i>
<i>Gender:</i>	<i>Female</i>
<i>Spouse:</i>	<i>Benjamin Howard Jr</i>
<i>Spouse Gender:</i>	<i>Male</i>
<i>Bond Date:</i>	<i>19 Feb 1804</i>
<i>Bond #:</i>	<i>000145277</i>
<i>Level Info:</i>	<i>North Carolina Marriage Bonds, 1741-1868</i>
<i>ImageNum:</i>	<i>008251</i>
<i>County:</i>	<i>Surry</i>
<i>Record #:</i>	<i>01 112</i>
<i>Bondsman:</i>	<i>Jesse Lester</i>

This connects Jesse to his step-daughter, Betsey, daughter of Robert Walker Esq. (A search of "Howard" family trees shows that very few of them seem to know Betsy's origins. However many show that "Betsy Howard" is buried in the Howard Cemetery, Perry County, TN. Tombstone shows she was born Dec 12 1785 in Cerry (sic) County NC, died Mar 24, 1859.)

Jesse Lester died 12 Dec 1815 in Rockford.

Here's the 1828 will of Mary (Walker) Lester:

Will of Mary Lester:

In the name of god amen, I MARY LESTER of the county of Surry & State of North Carolina being weak of boddy but of sound mind and memory thanks be given to god for the same do make and ordain this to be my last will and testament revoking all other wills by me heartofore maid.

1st: I recomend my soul to god who gave it me and My body to the earth from whence it came to be decently buried at the discretion of My children and as to sulch worly estate as it hath pleased god to bless me with in this life dispose of the same in manner and form following.

I give and bequeath to My daughter SALLY D. LESTER one hundred and fifty dollers.

Item: I give and bequeath to my four grand Sons JESSE, FRANCIS, JAMES P(?) & THOMAS P(?) FITZGARALD sons of JAMES FITZGARALD one hundred Dollers to be equally divided among them and to be given to them as they become of age.

Item: it is my will and desire that my negro woman ELVA shoud be sold by My Executors if she is not sold before my death and the money arising from the sale of said negro is to be applid as ---- states. VIZ one hundred and fifty dollars to SALLY D. LESTER and My four grandsons and the Surplus if there is any to be given to my daughter SALLY.

Item: I give and bequeath to My daughter SALLY D. LESTER my negro girl HENRIETTA & her increase.

Item: I give and bequeath to My grand daughter SARAH AN FITZGARRALD one negro girl by the name of CHARITY and if the negro girl should have children then and in that case it is my will and desire my other grand daughter MARRY ELIZABETH FITZGARALD should have one half of the increase.

Item: It is my will and desire that the above negro girl CHARITY shoud remain in the possession of my daughter MARY L. FITZGARALD wife of JAS. FITZGARALD during her natural life.

Item: I give and bequeath to my daughter SALLY D. LESTER all my stock of Cattle household and kitchen furniture and every other discription of property whatever to be had and her heirs forever..

Item: It is my will and desire that my daughter SALLY give unto my grandson JAMES P. FITZGARALD when he becomes of lawfull age twenty dollers.

*Item: it is my will and desire that this one hundred dollers left to my four grandsons shoud remain in the hands or direction of my executors to be put out on Interest or to the best advantage for said children. Lastly I constitue and appoint my daughter SALLY D. LESTER Executrix and my friend JOSEPH WILLIAMS JUN. Executor to this my last will and testament In witness whearof I do hereunto set my hand and seal this 13th day of April A.D. 1825. Sighned, sealed and delivered in presence of WINSTON LOMEY MARY (x)
LESTER (seal) J. FITZGARALD*

A Codicil to my last will and testament. Whereas the negro girl ELVA had not been sold and AGGEY has been purchased since making the forgoing last will it is now my will and desire that the said negro girl AGGY shall belong to my Daughter SALLY D. LESTER but the increase of said negro girl shall decend to my grand Children by my daughter MARY L. FITZGARALD but in case the sd girl shoud have bornd six children then and in that case the remainder that is to say all over six are to decend to my daughter SALLY D. LESTER and my grand son FRANCIS FITZGARALD in witness whearof I do hearunto set my hand and seal this 21st day of July 1828, TEST: MARY (x) LESTER (seal)

ROBERT MARTIN
WINSTON LOMAX

It's interesting that Mary did not mention her daughters by Robert Walker, Polly and Betsey (those were probably nicknames, would guess they were formally "Mary and Elizabeth") in her will. Also seems she named two of her daughters "Mary"? However it had been over 40 years since she married Jesse, and she had probably not maintained contact?