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## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE NORTH CAROLINA FARMERS' UNION

BY CHARLES P. LOOMIS

The Farmers' Union was the third large farmers' organization to sweep over the South. It was preceded by the Grange, which reached its height in 1874, when it had a membership of 858,050;<sup>1</sup> and the Farmers' Alliance, which in the early nineties attained the membership of about 3,000,000.<sup>2</sup> The Farmers' Union, which was officially known as the Farmers' Educational and Coöperative Union of America, was organized and chartered at Point, Texas, in 1902, from where it spread eastwardly through the South, entering North Carolina in 1905.<sup>3</sup> The Farmers' Union membership never exceeded 155,000<sup>4</sup> but it had a larger percentage of its total national membership in North Carolina when at its height, than did either the Grange or the Alliance when they were at their respective heights.<sup>5</sup>

The career of the North Carolina Farmers' Union was greatly conditioned by its predecessors, the Grange and the Alliance. Especially did the record of the Alliance affect the Farmers' Union. The Populist party had originated from the Alliance and fused with the Republican party in 1894. The Populist local self-governing law of 1895 had let about a thousand Negroes into public office.<sup>6</sup> This and

<sup>1</sup> Edward Wiest, *Agricultural Organization in the United States*, p. 395.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>3</sup> *Progressive Farmer* (Raleigh) February 14, 1905, and Charles S. Barrett, *Mission, History and Times of the Farmers' Union*, (Nashville, Marshall and Bruce Company, 1909), p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> Commodore B. Fisher in his *The Farmers' Union*, (Lexington, Kentucky, University of Kentucky, 1920), p. 6, states this to be the greatest membership, although literature during the time when the Union was at its height in the South, claims as many members for the Union as 4,000,000. Fisher's computations are based upon actual dues and are therefore the best estimate of paid-up male membership.

<sup>5</sup> The North Carolina Farmers' Alliance had about three times as many actual members when at its height as did the North Carolina Farmers' Union, but the National organization of the Alliance greatly exceeded that of the Union.

<sup>6</sup> Simeon A. Delap, "The Populist Party in North Carolina," *Historical Papers published by the Trinity College Historical Society*, Series XIV, (Durham, N. C., 1922) pp. 40-74.



## NOTES ON JOHN CHAVIS

BY EDGAR W. KNIGHT

The unusual story of John Chavis has been told in part by several writers<sup>1</sup> most of whom have reported certain beliefs or traditions about this remarkable man which have come to be rather generally accepted wherever his name is known.

It is commonly said that Chavis was a full-blooded, free-born Negro, that he was educated at Princeton, that he had an unusual mastery of Latin and Greek, and that he was an able preacher in the Presbyterian church and a very effective teacher. It is said that the career of Chavis "was the result of a wager that a Negro could not be educated." It is generally reported also that he was received as an equal socially and asked to table by the most respectable people of the neighborhoods in which he lived in North Carolina in the early part of the nineteenth century. It is known that he had near Raleigh a school in which he taught white boys and it is said that the sons of prominent families were among his students. In the list of those generally accepted are the names of Archibald E. Henderson and John L. Henderson, sons of Chief Justice Henderson; Charles Manly, who became the last Whig governor of North Carolina; Abraham Rencher, who served as a member of Congress from 1829 to 1839 and from 1841 to 1843, as chargé d'affaires' to Portugal, and later as governor of New Mexico; Priestly Hinton Mangum and his brother, Willie P. Mangum, who served in both Houses of Congress from North Carolina; and other pupils who "be-

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Charles Lee. *History of Education in North Carolina*. Circular of Information, No. 2, 1888, (United States Bureau of Education, Washington), pp. 138-141. Johnson, Edward A. *A School History of the Negro Race in America*. Raleigh, 1890. pp. 189-191. *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, New York, 1897, Vol. VII, p. 123. Quick, W. H. *Negro Stars in All Ages of the World*. Richmond, 1898. Pp. 103-110. Bassett, John Spencer. "Slavery in the State of North Carolina," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Series XVII, No. 7-8, Baltimore, 1899. Pp. 73-76. Weeks, Stephen B. "An Antebellum Negro Preacher," in *The Southern Workman*, February, 1914. Pp. 101-106. Boyd, William K. *History of North Carolina*. Chicago, 1919. P. 221. Knight, Edgar W. *The Academy Movement in the South*. Durham, 1920. Pp. 21, 22. Seawell, Joseph Lacy. "Black Teacher of Southern Whites," in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 1924. P. 8. Seawell, Joseph Lacy. *Law Tales for Laymen and Wayside Tales from Carolina*. Raleigh, 1925. Pp. 197-204. This is the article that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*. McDuffie, Penelope. "Chapters in the Life of Wiley Person Mangum," in *The Trinity College Historical Society Historical Papers*, Series XV, 1925. Pp. 13, 14. Ashe, Samuel A'Court. *History of North Carolina*. Raleigh, 1925. Vol. II, p. 21. Knight, Edgar W. "John Chavis: A Negro Teacher of Southern Whites," in *The Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 1929. Other sources of information are the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States for 1801, p. 15; and the Minutes of the Lexington Presbytery of Virginia for 1799 to 1801, of the Hanover Presbytery in that State for 1801, of the Orange Presbytery of North Carolina, and letters from Chavis of Willie P. Mangum from 1826 to 1837. Copies of these letters are in the offices of the North Carolina Historical Commission.



came prominent politicians, lawyers, preachers, physicians, and educators." Weeks<sup>2</sup> seemed to believe that Chavis taught white girls also. The report given by most of the writers on Chavis that Willie P. Mangum was one of his pupils has recently been denied, as will be noted later on in this article.

Little is known about the early life of Chavis. Quick<sup>3</sup> says that "Chavis was a native of the West India Islands, and upon coming to the United States he applied for and obtained a certificate of his naturalization." Johnson<sup>4</sup> says that "This gentleman . . . came to the United States in 1822." But the date given cannot be correct, as the Minutes of the Lexington and Hanover Presbyteries in Virginia and other records show. Seawell<sup>5</sup> says that, "according to information from contemporaries of Chavis," the Negro "came from the West Indies to North Carolina during boyhood." Smith<sup>6</sup> says that the birthplace of Chavis "cannot be located with certainty, but it is probable that he was born near Oxford, in Granville County." Bassett<sup>7</sup> says "He was, probably, born in Granville County, near Oxford, about 1763." Ashe<sup>8</sup> says that Chavis served in the Revolutionary War and owned slaves. Chavis himself said, in a letter to Willie P. Mangum March 10, 1832, "if I am Black, I am free born American and a revolutionary soldier." This last statement contains practically all that seems to be known of the man until he appears in the records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1801. But in the church records and the Mangum letters Chavis stands revealed as a rather unusual Negro who seems to have won recognition from the leaders of an aristocratic, slave-holding state where he lived and worked so creditably a century ago.

It is not definitely known where and when Chavis acquired the education and training which gave him the high reputation he has brought down the years as preacher and teacher. There is a strong tradition, already referred to, that he was a student at Princeton during the presidency of Dr. John Witherspoon who was inaugurated in 1768 and who died twenty-six years later. Smith, who says

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<sup>1</sup> P. 103.

<sup>2</sup> P. 104.

<sup>3</sup> P. 189.

<sup>4</sup> *Law Tales for Laymen and Wayside Tales from Carolina*, p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> P. 139.

<sup>6</sup> P. 73.

<sup>7</sup> P. 21.



that "He studied at Princeton as a private pupil of Dr. Witherspoon," gives as authority for this statement some letters which Dr. Charles Phillips of the University of North Carolina had received in regard to Chavis from "well-known citizens who were personally acquainted with the Negro divine. He is remembered by them as an old man, after he had retired from the work of teaching, and of his early life but little is known."<sup>9</sup> Bassett says that Chavis "in early life attracted the attention of the whites, and he was sent to Princeton to see if a negro would take a collegiate education. He was a private pupil under the famous Dr. Witherspoon, and his ready acquisition of knowledge soon convinced his friends that the experiment would issue favorably. After leaving Princeton he went to Virginia, sent thither, no doubt, to preach to the Negroes."<sup>10</sup> Weeks does not mention the tradition or belief that Chavis had attended Princeton.<sup>11</sup> Boyd says<sup>12</sup> that Chavis "was sent to Princeton, where he was privately tutored by Dr. Witherspoon," and gives Bassett as the reference. Seawell quotes the statement of Smith that Chavis studied at Princeton. McDuffie says<sup>13</sup> that Chavis "was educated at Princeton as a private pupil of Dr. Witherspoon," and gives Bassett and Boyd as references. A sketch of Chavis in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* says<sup>14</sup> that he "was sent to Princeton, where he studied under Dr. Witherspoon."

There is no clear proof, however, that Chavis was ever a student at Princeton. Beyond the known fact that he was not graduated the institution has no genuine record of the man. Prior to 1781, when the records of the faculty begin, the only documents are fragmentary and casual,—“treasurer’s reports, letters, class lists, and various reports.” The minutes of the trustees are complete from the beginning of the institution but these “do not interest themselves with undergraduates.” Although there are no known official records which verify his attendance there, the tradition or belief that Chavis was a student at Princeton seems so well founded that he is listed among the non-graduates of the institution.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, his presence at Princeton would not have been extraordinary because one or two

<sup>9</sup> P. 139.

<sup>10</sup> P. 74.

<sup>11</sup> P. 101.

<sup>12</sup> P. 221.

<sup>13</sup> P. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Vol. VII, p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Statement made in a letter to the writer by Mr. V. Lansing Collins, Secretary of Princeton University, September 14, 1929.



Negro students and several Delaware Indians were there under Witherspoon. But if Chavis were one of his students he arrived at Princeton before 1794 when the eminent divine went to his reward.

It appears that Chavis received a part of his education at the academy which later grew into Washington and Lee University, at Lexington, Virginia. The Scotch and Scotch-Irish spread over the mountainous parts of Maryland and Virginia and penetrated far into the Shenandoah Valley. About the middle of the eighteenth century a group of these immigrants settled in Augusta and Rockbridge counties of Virginia. They set up a school which was called Augusta Academy until 1776 when it was moved to the immediate vicinity of Lexington; the name was changed to Liberty Hall, and Reverend William Graham, a graduate of Princeton, was appointed principal. A half dozen years later the school was incorporated as Liberty Hall Academy, and in 1798 the name was changed to Washington Academy, in recognition of the first important gift the school ever received, for then as now educational institutions sometimes acquired names from their prominent benefactors. In 1784 the legislature of Virginia had presented or had tried to present to George Washington, as a token of appreciation of his service in the Revolutionary War, a number of shares of stock in the James River Navigation Company. He refused to accept the gift for his own benefit but gave the stock to Liberty Hall Academy, and in appreciation for this benefaction, which still yields an annual revenue of about \$3,000, the trustees changed the name in honor of the Father of his Country. In 1813 the school became Washington College and in 1871 Washington and Lee University.<sup>16</sup>

Chavis seems to have been a student at the institution while it was known as Washington Academy. At the court of quarterly session held for Rockbridge County, Virginia, April 6, 1802, the following order was made: "On the motion of Rev. John Chavis, a black man, It is ordered that the clerk of this court certify that the said Chavis has been known to the court for several years last past and that he has always, since known to the court, been considered as a freeman and they believe him to be such, and that he has always while in this county conducted himself in a decent orderly and respectable manner,

<sup>16</sup> *Washington and Lee University Bulletin*, March, 1929, p. 22.



and also that he has been a student at Washington Academy where they believe he went through a regular course of Academical Studies."<sup>17</sup> But if Chavis were born in 1763, the date given by Bassett, he was a mature man when he attended the Virginia institution which did not acquire the name of Washington Academy until 1798.

But it is known that Chavis was a licensed preacher in the Presbyterian Church, and this fact has significance. The Scotch and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians had great faith in the value of education and such high esteem and reverence for an educated ministry that they gave to secondary and collegiate training an attention that was unusual for the period in which Chavis lived. They spread over many of the colonies and were especially strong in the South during the latter half of the eighteenth century. In the educational movement which they encouraged Princeton College was a powerful influence, for scores of its graduates, many of them native Southerners, returned to their section of the country and became leaders as teachers and preachers.<sup>18</sup>

As early as May, 1779, the New York and Philadelphia Synod, meeting in Philadelphia, appointed a committee to meet in Princeton, New Jersey, the following September to dispose of the interest of a charitable fund in the hands of the trustees of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) "for the education of poor and pious youth for the ministry."<sup>19</sup> The Synod received a request from a member of the Hanover (Virginia) Presbytery "praying that some missionaries might be sent into the State of Virginia to preach the gospel, and especially that a few ministers of genius, prudence, and address, might spend some considerable time in attempting to form that people into regular congregations, under the discipline and government of the Presbyterian Church, and to settle among them and undertake the education of their youth. . . . The Synod do, therefore, earnestly recommend it to all their Presbyteries to turn

<sup>17</sup> Order Book No. 6, p. 10. See also Ballach, J. C., *A History of Slavery in Virginia*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> The Committee on Church Buildings of the Orange Presbytery which met at Hawfields, North Carolina, in October, 1829, declared in its report that "There is room in this Presbytery for every student which Princeton can probably furnish in the next 6 years." At that time the Orange Presbytery had thirty-four organized churches in eleven counties with a membership of 1500. In Orange County alone, which was "best supplied with presbyterian preaching," with seven ministers and ten churches, there were 500 families "without the Bible . . . . For the Presbytery of Orange, then, to give that measure of attention to every county within their bounds, which they have given to the County of Orange, it would be necessary that they should immediately erect 356 churches, and settle 246 ministers." Minutes for October, 1829, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Philadelphia, 1841, p. 484.



their attention to this object, as peculiarly interesting and important. And if it is by any means possible, to furnish some missions to the State of Virginia, and such especially as shall endeavour to form congregations, and to affect a settlement among them, having respect to the popular talents as well as piety of such missionaries, and to their capacity for directing the education of youth."<sup>20</sup>

At the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States in Philadelphia in May, 1800, one of the subjects considered concerned the "instruction of the Negroes, the poor and those who are destitute of the means of grace in various parts of this extensive country."<sup>21</sup> The following year<sup>22</sup> that body passed the following resolution:

That . . . Mr. John Chavis, a black man of prudence and piety, who has been educated and licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia, be employed as a missionary among people of his own colour, until the meeting of the next General Assembly; and that for his better direction in the discharge of duties which are attended with many circumstances of delicacy and difficulty, some prudential instructions be issued to him by the assembly, governing himself by which, the knowledge of religion among that people may be made more and more to strengthen the order of society: And the Rev. Messrs Hoge, Alexander, Logan, and Stephenson, were appointed a committee to draught instructions to said John Chavis, and prescribe his route.

The records of the Presbytery of Lexington, Virginia, show that at its meeting at Lexington October 15-19, 1799:<sup>23</sup>

John Chavis, a black man, personally known to most members of Pres. & of unquestionably good fame, & a communicant in the Presn. church, was introduced and conversed with relative to his practical acquaintance with living religion & his call to preach the ever lasting Gospel, Pres. considering that, they like their Heavenly Father, should be no respecter of persons, being satisfied with his narrative, agreed, notwithstanding his colour, to take him under their care, for further trials in the usual form. Accordingly, an Exegesis in lattin on the theme 'In quo consistat salvatio ab precatto,' and a Homily on the decree of Election, were appointed him as pieces of trial against our next meeting. Pres. adjourned to meet at Tinkling-Springs on the second Wednesday in next June; concluded with prayer.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>21</sup> *Acts and Proceedings*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of October 19, 1799.



The minutes of the meeting at Tinkling-Springs Meetinghouse the following year show that

"A letter was received from....."

"Mr. John Chavis, a candidate for the Gospel Ministry under the care of this Presby. stating the reasons why he did not attend this meeting of Presby. & deliver the parts of trial assigned him; also requesting that such other parts of trial may now be assigned him, as Presby. shall think proper, to appoint him prior to his licensure; & giving reasons for his request."<sup>24</sup> The minutes of the next day contain this record: "The letter from Mr. John Chavis candidate for the gospel ministry, stating the reasons why he did not attend this meeting of Presby. & after mature deliberation, Presby. agreed that Mr. Chavis should have his request."<sup>25</sup>

In October of the same year the Lexington Presbytery met at Louisburgh. The following action was taken:

Presby. met agreeably to adjournment. Constituted with prayer. Members present as above. According to order, the minutes of yesterday were read. Rev. William Wilson informed Presby. that he wished the balance due to him for expences to the General Assembly to be appropriated to the use of M. John Chevis, Provided sd. Chevis shall be licensed to preach the Gospel, whereupon the Stated Clerk was directed to examine the records for the purpose of ascertaining the amount of ed. balance and to give Mr. Chevis, an order on the Treasurer for whatever may appear to be due to the Rev. William Wilson.<sup>26</sup>

On the last day of the meeting the Presbytery took the following action:

The farther Trials of Mr. Chevis was defered untill the intermediate Presby. appointed to meet at Timber-Ridge meetinghouse on the third Tuesday of November next.<sup>27</sup>

The Presbytery met at Timber-Ridge Meetinghouse November 18-19 and it was recorded that on the second day:

On motion, Mr. John Chevis preached a sermon from Acts, 16th. chapter, 31st. verse: "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ & thou shalt be saved," which had been assigned to him at a former meeting of Presby. as the subject of a popular discourse previous to his licensure.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Minutes for June 11, 1800. The letter is not copied in the minutes and it is not known what reasons Chavis gave. It is possible that he could not do the exegesis in Latin.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes for June 12, 1800.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes for October 25, 1800. The name is spelled different ways in the records. In his letters to Mangum he generally spelled it "Chaves."

<sup>27</sup> Minutes for October 27, 1800.



Later in the same day the following action was taken:

Presbyn. had an interloquitur to consider the popular discourse of Mr. Chevis & after some deliberation thereon agreed to sustain it as a satisfactory part of trial & to licence him to preach the Gospel. Mr. Chevis was accordingly licensed & record thereof was ordered to be made in the following words, viz. at Timber Ridge Meetinghouse, the 19th. day of November, 1800, the Presbn. of Lexington having received sufficient testimonials in favor of Mr. John Chevis, of his being of good moral character, of his being in full communion with the church & his having made some progress in literature, proceeded to take him through a course of trials for licensure & he having given satisfaction as to his experimental acquaintance with religion & proficiency in divinity, Presbn. did & hereby do express their approbation of these parts of trial & he having adopted the Confession of Faith of this church & satisfactorily answered the questions appointed to be put to candidates to be licensed the Presby. did & hereby do license him the said Jno. Chevis to preach the Gospel of Christ as a probationer for the holy ministry within the bounds of this Presby. or wherever he shall be orderly called, hoping as he is a man of colour he may be peculiarly useful to those of his own complexion. Ordered that Mr. Chevis receive an attested copy of the above minutes.<sup>29</sup>

And still later on the same day it was ordered that "Between this and next meeting of Presbn. Mr. Chaves is appointed to supply at discretion thro' the bounds of Presbn. with leave (if health requires) to travel without the bounds."<sup>30</sup>

In June, 1801, the Lexington Presbytery met at Rocky Springs Meetinghouse. This record appears in the minutes for June 9:

"Mr. Jno. Chavis, a licentiate of this Presbn. delivered a discourse from Mal. 4th. C., 1st. & 2nd. verses, 'Behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven' etc."<sup>31</sup> Later in the day Chavis requested that he be dismissed from the Lexington Presbytery in order to join the Presbytery of Hanover, and when the question was put "it was unanimously voted in the affirmative. Mr. Chaves therefore being dismissed from this Presby. was recommended to the care of the Presbn. of Hanover as a man of exemplary piety, & possessed of many qualifications which merit their respectful attention."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Minutes for November 19, 1800.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Minutes for June 9, 1801.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



Chavis is found two months later presenting his credentials to the Presbytery of Hanover, as the minutes of that judicatory in meeting at Briery early in September show:

Mr. John Chavis produced a dismissal from Lexington Presbytery in which he was recommended to the Care of this Presbytery as a Probationer for the Gospel Ministry, and as a person in good standing. But as Mr. Chavis is now riding as a Missionary under the Direction of the General Assembly, the presbytery did not see their way clear to receive him at present under their care as they could exercise no control over him. However at the request of M. Chavis, it was ordered that the said Dismissal be deposited in the Hands of the stated clerk, until the Time expires for which he is engaged, or until he shall resign the Commission he now holds under the General Assembly.<sup>33</sup>

As already noted, the General Assembly had employed Chavis "as a missionary among people of his own colour" and a committee had been appointed to give him instructions and to "prescribe his route." This action was taken in 1801. The records of the Assembly for 1802<sup>34</sup> contain the following item:

That the journal of Mr. John Chavis, a black man, licensed by the Presbytery of Lexington, in Virginia, was read in the Assembly. He appears to have executed his mission with great diligence, fidelity and prudence. He served as a missionary nine months.

Another item in the same proceedings is as follows:

That Mr. John Chavis be appointed a missionary for as much of his time as may be convenient; to take his instructions with respect to his routes, from the Rev. Drury Lacy and the Rev. Archibald Alexander.<sup>35</sup>

The next year (1803) the Assembly "observed with great pleasure that the desire for spreading the gospel, among the destitute inhabitants on our frontiers; among the blacks, and among the savage tribes, on our borders; has been rapidly increasing, during the last year, in various parts of our church." It received the reports of its missionaries, among whom was Chavis, and ordered them "appointed missionaries, for the times, and on the routes" specified in the report of its Committee on Missions. He was referred to as "Mr. John

<sup>33</sup> Minutes for September 4, 1801.

<sup>34</sup> Acts and Proceedings, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



Chavis, a black man, licensed by the Presbytery of Lexington," and he and the other missionaries were "left at discretion, as to the time of the year in which to perform their services, provided their tours be completed, so as to enable them to report, agreeable to the instructions of the Committee of Missions."<sup>36</sup>

It seems that in 1804 Chavis was employed for missionary work for three months in Virginia and North Carolina. The following year he was reported as a missionary under the direction of the Synod of Virginia. "Mr. Chavis, a missionary to the blacks, itinerated to several counties in the Southern parts of the State: but owing to some peculiar circumstances, stated in his Journal his mission to them was not attended with any considerable success." But it was ordered "That Mr. John Chavis, be a missionary for six months, to pursue nearly the same route as last year, and employ himself chiefly among the blacks and people of colour." He seems to have served for two months in 1806 "Among the blacks and people of color in Maryland if practicable; otherwise at his discretion." And the following year the assembly ordered "That Mr. John Chavis be employed three months, as a missionary to the blacks in North Carolina and Virginia, and that he be left at discretion as to his route."<sup>37</sup>

It is said that Chavis returned to North Carolina about 1805 and soon afterwards joined the Orange Presbytery.<sup>38</sup> It is also said that he preached during the next twenty years or more in Granville, Orange, and Wake counties. He probably continued with more or less regularity the mission work similar to that which he had done among the Negroes for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church; and, although he may not have had a regular pastorate, he is said to have preached frequently until 1832.<sup>39</sup>

The Orange Presbytery, meeting in Raleigh in April of that year, had up for consideration a letter from John Chavis, "a free man of color, and a licentiate under the care of the Presbytery, stating his difficulties and embarrassments in consequence of an act passed at

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 99, 100, 164.

<sup>38</sup> Smith says (p. 139) that in 1805 Chavis "was granted dismission from the Hanover Presbytery to join the Orange Presbytery. He united with the latter in 1809, being received as a licentiate." Bassett says (p. 73) that in 1805 Chavis "returned to his native State," but that for "some cause, I know not what, it was not till 1809 that he was received as a licentiate by the Orange Presbytery." I have not been able to find the minutes of the Hanover Presbytery which show his dismission nor any minutes of the Orange Presbytery before October, 1829.

<sup>39</sup> See Smith, p. 139; Bassett, pp. 73, 74; and Weeks, p. 102.



the last session of the legislature of this State, forbidding free people of color to preach.

Whereupon: *Resolved*, that Presbytery in view of all the circumstances of the case, recommend to their licentiate to acquiesce in the decision of the Legislature referred to, until God in his Providence shall open to him the path of duty, in regard to the exercise of his ministry.<sup>40</sup>

The act referred to was passed as a result of the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in August of 1831, and bore the title "An act for the better regulation of the conduct of Negroes, slaves and free persons of color." The statute made it unlawful for any free Negro, slave or free person of color to preach or exhort in public, "under any pretense," or in any manner to officiate as a preacher or teacher in any prayer meeting or other association for worship where slaves of different families were collected together; and any free Negro or free person of color who was duly convicted on indictment before any court having jurisdiction thereof was for each offense to receive "not exceeding thirty-nine lashes on his bare back. . . ." <sup>41</sup>

In September of 1832 the Orange Presbytery met at Milton and adopted the following report of its committee on the Religious Instruction of Black People:

*Resolved*, That every minister and licentiate of this Presbytery, be earnestly requested to preach at least one sermon on each Sabbath, to the black people, and that they call to their aid in giving religious instruction, in conducting their meetings, and in watching over the spiritual interests of the black congregation, such intelligent, prudent and active laymen, as they may need.<sup>42</sup>

And in the minutes of the same meeting appears the following:

The committee to whom the case of Mr. Chavis was referred, reported that they recommend that a collection be taken up among the members of the Presbytery, for Mr. Chavis, and that a committee be appointed to take measures for the removal of Mr. Chavis into the bounds of some Presbyterian congregation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Proceedings*, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> Acts of the General Assembly, Session 1831-1832, Chapter IV.

<sup>42</sup> *Proceedings*, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80. Chavis wrote to Mangum October 1, 1832, that he had just heard that "the Orange Presbytery to which I belong had entered into a resolution to support me & my wife during life and had appointed a Committee to make arrangements for that purpose." He viewed "this Presbyterial arrangement as a merciful providence for which I am thankful."



The collection amounted to \$52.42.

It is evident that Chavis was hard pressed after he was debarred from preaching. Some of his letters to Mangum, to whom he wrote often and intimately, show also that he had difficulty in getting up a school. Probably in an effort to make a little money, Chavis published a sermon or exegesis on the doctrines of the atonement. Smith<sup>44</sup> gives its title as "The Extent of the Atonement" and says that the publication circulated widely at fifteen cents a copy. Weeks<sup>45</sup> says that Chavis published in 1837 a vigorous argument against the popular conception of Calvinism in "Chavis' letter upon the Doctrine of the Atonement of Christ" and that the pamphlet "is said to have been widely circulated." Weeks had not seen a copy of the publication. Chavis had contemplated such a work as early as September, 1833, for at that time the Orange Presbytery, in session at New Hope, adopted the following resolutions:<sup>46</sup>

That this Presbytery deem it inexpedient to do anything in relation to Mr. Chavis' proposed publication on the Atonement, inasmuch as it is on a subject that has been amply discussed, and of course would not be generally interesting, and the proceeds would probably contribute nothing towards his support. That Dr. C. L. Read be added to the committee hitherto appointed in Mr. Chavis' case.

At a meeting of the same Presbytery in Newbern in April, 1834, the following resolution was adopted: "*Resolved*, That the committee hitherto appointed in the case of Mr. Chavis, be directed to inquire into his situation, and make such provision for him as his necessities may require."<sup>47</sup> And at a meeting in Greensboro in September of the same year the following action was taken:<sup>48</sup>

*Resolved*, That in view of the present necessitous condition of Mr. John Chavis, a free man of color, and a licentiate under the care of this Presbytery, owing chiefly to his advanced age and bodily infirmities, the Presbytery of Orange will provide a competent support for Mr. Chavis, during the years ensuing, by private contributions, or otherwise; and that the Rev. Messrs McPheeters and Osborne, with Mr. John Primrose of Raleigh, be a committee to supervise the application of this charity; and that the contributions be forwarded to the Committee as early as possible.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> *Proceedings*, pp. 95, 96.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



Between October, 1834, and April, 1835, at which latter date the Presbytery met at Hillsboro, the sum of \$83.35 was collected for Chavis, and at the same time the following action was taken:<sup>49</sup>

*Resolved*, that the resolutions adopted at the last stated session of Presbytery at Greensboro, respecting Mr. J. Chavis be recommended to the special notice of the members of this Presbytery, as expressive of their continued determination to secure a competent support for this aged licentiate of our Presbytery.

That the cause of Mr. Chavis be laid before each church and congregation within the bounds of this Presbytery.

At a meeting in Lexington in October, 1835, the case of Mr. Chavis was again brought up for consideration "and subscriptions for his support taken up."<sup>50</sup> And at a meeting in Danville, Virginia, the following April Rev. Robert Burwell was appointed the agent of the Presbytery "to supply the wants of John Chavis, a superannuated licentiate."<sup>51</sup>

A year later, April, 1837, at a meeting in Hillsboro, the following minute was recorded:<sup>52</sup>

The committee on the case of John Chavis, superannuated licentiate of this Presbytery, reported that it is inexpedient to change the present plan for his support, and that the usual collection has been made for that purpose. Messrs. Burwell and Norwood were appointed a committee to superintend this business.

And in August of the same year, at a meeting at Cross Roads, Orange County, the following item was recorded:<sup>53</sup>

The Presbytery did solemnly promise to pay to the said J. Chavis, \$50, annually, during his natural life. This sum was assessed on the churches in the following proportions, viz: Bethlehem Gum Grove, Speedwell, Carmel, New Hope, Stoney Creek, Fairfield and Spring Garden, High Rock, Sandy Ridge, Griers, and Bethany, seventy-five cents each, semi-annually; Lexington, Bethseda, Harmony, Bethel, Little River, Chapel Hill, and Eno, one dollar, each; Cross Roads, Buffalo, Alamance, Greensboro', and Hawfields, \$1.25, each; Red House, Danville, and Milton, \$1.75 each; and Hillsborough the sum of \$2. These several sums are to be paid by each of the churches *semi-annually*.

On motion of Dr. T. P. Atkinson, the stated clerk was directed to report the action of the Presbytery on this subject, to the several ses-

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>50</sup> *Proceedings*, p. 145.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



sions; and finally the sessions were, and hereby are, required to be punctual in sending up, at each stated meeting of the Presbytery, their respective proportions of the sum pledged, for the support of this aged laborer in the Lord's vineyard.

His educational work in North Carolina, for which he is best known, was begun as early as 1808. In August of that year he made the following announcement through a Raleigh newspaper:<sup>54</sup>

John Chavis takes this method of informing his employers, and the citizens of Raleigh in general, that the present quarter of his school will end the 15th of September, and the next will commence on the 19th. He will, at the same time, open an evening school for the purpose of instructing children of colour, as he intends, for the accommodation of some of his employers, to exclude all children of colour from his day school.

The evening school will commence at an hour by sun. When the white children leave the house, those of colour will take their places, and continue until ten o'clock.

The terms of teaching white children will be as usual, two and a half dollars per quarter; those of color, one dollar and three quarters. In both cases, the whole of the money is to be paid in advance to Mr. Benjamin S. King. Those who produce certificates from him of their having paid the money, will be admitted.

Those who think proper to put their children under his care, may rely upon the strictest attention being paid, not only to their education but to their morals, which he deems an *important* part of education.

He hopes to have a better school house by the commencement of the next quarter.

How long Chavis conducted his school on the dual plan is not known. On December 18, 1827, Chavis wrote as follows to Senator Willie P. Mangum to whom he sent many friendly and intimate but often very frank letters, over a period of many years: "I would thank you to attend my next examination in Wake. It will be at Revises Cross roads where you were once on the last Thursday in July. I shall tell the people that you will be there. I know it will be pleasing and give dignity to my prospects." In a letter to Mangum March 11, 1828, Chavis said: "Pray don't forget to attend my examination on the last Thursday in July. I have told my employers that you are to be there." And Joseph Gales, editor of *The Raleigh Register*, said in that paper April 22, 1830, that he had recently attended an examination "of the free children of color, attached to

<sup>54</sup>*The Raleigh Register*, August 26, 1808.



the school conducted by *John Chavis*, also colored, but a regularly educated Presbyterian minister, and we have seldom received more gratification from any exhibition of a similar character." Gales was high in his praise of the pupils and also of the teacher; and from his report of the examination, or commencement exercises, to be referred to later, it seems that the double session arrangement was still being used.

Bassett, Boyd, and Seawell, as well as Smith and the *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* say that Willie P. Mangum was a pupil of Chavis. Weeks does not say so; and McDuffie says: "In the list of his pupils generally accepted is the name of Willie Person Mangum. . . . Without other evidence one might judge this to be the fact from the long, intimate, and always affectionate letters written by this old man to Mangum when he was in political life. . . . None of these, however, refers to Mangum's own school days and we have no written report of his study under Chavis." An editorial writer in the *Greensboro Daily News*<sup>55</sup> commented upon the reported relation of Chavis and Mangum as teacher and pupil in connection with a review of my *Academy Movement in the South*. On March 20, that paper published from Mr. Preston Mangum Weeks, a son of Stephen B. Weeks, a letter denying the report that his great-grandfather had studied under Chavis. In part the letter said:

However well John Chavis was educated and regardless of North Carolinians whom he may have tutored, he did not have the honor of teaching Willie P. Mangum. To prove, this I will quote an excerpt from Captain Ashe's 'Biographical History of North Carolina,' which gives the names of his tutors prior to his matriculation at the University of North Carolina in 1812, where he graduated in 1815:

'He received his preliminary education in part at the hands of Thomas M. Flint, a strolling pedagogue, in part at the Fayetteville Academy under Reverend Colin McIver, and in part in the Raleigh academy under Reverend Doctor McPheeters.'<sup>56</sup>

Neither in North Carolina history nor in family tradition, for Senator Mangum was my great-grandfather, have I been able to find a trace of this negro's name in regard to Willie P. Mangum's preliminary education. I have quoted above the most trustworthy source upon the life of Willie P. Mangum that is now in publication and which shows definitely that John Chavis was not one of his teachers.

<sup>55</sup> March 9, 1920.

<sup>56</sup> The sketch from which this was quoted was written by Stephen B. Weeks.



If Willie P. Mangum did not go to school to Chavis, it would be interesting to know the origin of the friendship which obviously existed between the two men. Weeks himself, who married the granddaughter of Mangum, says:<sup>57</sup> "His relations with Judge Mangum were very intimate. I might say they were affectionate, even fatherly. He was an occasional visitor at the house of the Judge and was treated with all deference and courtesy, so much so that it caused astonishment on the part of the younger children, which was met in turn by, 'Hush, child, he is your father's friend.' The letters of Chavis which have come down to us indicate no social inequality."

There seems to be no known written record which explicitly shows that Chavis was Mangum's teacher. But the long and intimate letters<sup>58</sup> which the former wrote to the latter over a period of more than a dozen years reveal an affectionate friendship and a keen interest of Chavis in everything that in any way affected the life and future of Mangum. What could have been the origin of this peculiar friendship and interest?

In these letters Chavis refers to some of his former students as "my sons." In letters dated November 16 and November 18, 1827, he refers to "My son Priestly." In a letter dated March 11, 1828, he wrote: "Give my respects to my sons Abram [Rencher] and Priestly and tell them I never expect to see them again, unless they should condescend to come to see me." It was in this letter that he urged Mangum not to forget to attend "my examination on the last Thursday in July." September 30, 1831, Chavis said in a long letter to Mangum: "I see, my son Priestly as I expected is not elected. Yes and you may tell him from me, that unless he lay aside that stubborn unyielding disposition of his and become condescending and familiar he will never set the River on fire, neither for himself or his children." In a letter of March 10, 1832, Chavis calls Mangum "my son" and in the same letter sends his "respects to my son Abraham Rencher." Again, in a letter dated September 24, 1832, he calls Mangum "my son." In this letter he also refers to Willie P. Mangum, to Priestly, and to Rencher together thus: "You cannot conceive what I suffer on yours Renchers and Priestly [account?] and

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> These letters are in the Library of Congress. Copies of them are in the Offices of the North Carolina Historical Commission.



though I have good reason to believe the latter has entirely turned his back upon me yet I love him and his character." On February 26, 1834, he sent his regards to "my son Abraham Rencher." In the same letter he said that his "character as a teacher" was known to Mangum and Horner. For sometime Chavis had recommended himself to Mangum as a suitable teacher for the Senator's daughter and on July 21, 1832, had written Mangum to say to Horner "that I want his daughter Juliana for the same purpose" and that he knew English better than "when he came to school to me." In his letters to Mangum he almost always sent his compliments to Mrs. Mangum and once he wrote: "Give my love to Mrs. Mangum and tell her. . . . I would be glad to know what she has done with Sally." In another letter he said: "I am told that my son Priestly is likely to lose his election, and that it will be solely and alone, owing to his stubborn and unyielding disposition. Strange that he cannot or will not call to recollection that from the beginning of time to this moment, to be useful, a man must be condescending. . . ."

Some of these letters show that Chavis was bitterly opposed to the abolition of slavery. The abolition petitions presented to Congress annoyed and pained him. On April 4, 1836, he wrote to Mangum: "I am already of the opinion that Congress has no more right to pass such a law than I have to go to your house and take Orange and bring him home and keep him as my servant. And I am astonished that the members of Congress act so much like a parcel of mullets nibbling at baite upon fish hooks. Why don't they act like men who—come up boldly to the subject of those petitions and put their feet upon them and stamp them to the centre of the earth, in such a manner, that all the powers on earth never could be able to raise them again. . . . That Slavery is a national evil no one doubts, but what is to be done? It exists and what can be done with it? All that can be done, is to make the best of a bad bargain. For I am clearly of the opinion that immediate emancipation would be to entail the greatest earthly curse upon my brethren according to the flesh that could be conferred upon them especially in a country like ours, I suppose if they knew I said this they would be ready to take my life, but as I wish them well I feel no disposition to see them any more miserable than they are."



His attitude to his race is reflected in an editorial which Joseph Gales, the able Whig editor of *The Raleigh Register* wrote in his paper in April, 1830; and already referred to: "On Friday last, we attended an examination of the free children of color, attached to the school conducted by *John Chavis*, also colored, but a regularly educated Presbyterian minister, and we have seldom received more gratification from any exhibition of a similar character. To witness a well regulated school, composed of this class of persons—to see them setting an example both in behavior and scholarship, which their *white* superiors might take pride in imitating, was a cheering spectacle to a philanthropist. The exercises throughout, evinced a degree of attention and assiduous care on the part of the instructor, highly creditable, and of attainment on the part of his scholars almost incredible. We were also much pleased with the sensible address which closed the examination. The object of the respectable teacher, was to impress on the scholars, the fact, that they occupied an inferior and subordinate station in society, and were possessed but of limited privileges; but that even *they* might become useful in their particular sphere by making a proper improvement of the advantages afforded them."<sup>59</sup>

It appears that Chavis was under criticism in 1837 for his alleged interest in the education of the children of free Negroes. He wrote Mangum:<sup>60</sup> "I once more request you to answer the letters I wrote you, respecting my being charged with my going to Raleigh to Teach the children of the free people of colour. . . . Your answer is to be founded upon the letters I wrote to you when in Congress on the abolition question.

"I expect to leave the neighbourhood the last of March, and I wish to be prepared to meet malicious reports. Col. Rogers can tell you all about the business."

When enemies attacked Mangum for his position on the tariff, nullification, or other public issue, Chavis always rushed to his friend's defense. Once he wrote:<sup>61</sup> "To hear you traduced is killing. I can blame and scold you myself but I dont like other people to do it. If I think you to be wrong in any case I don't want other people to think so, & therefore I am so tormented at the thoughts of your

<sup>59</sup> *The Raleigh Register*, April 22, 1830.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Mangum, February 1, 1837.

<sup>61</sup> Letter to Mangum, November 3, 1832.



being in favor of the reëlection of G. Jackson, & what almost takes my life is, that I cannot believe that you view him as an honorable dignified and affectionate character & why you sh.d wish him to continue in the seat of the chief Magistrate I cannot conceive." In the same letter he said: "One thing I must say to you in Conclusion. That I am truly sorry that I am so ignorant & yet take so deep an interest in the welfare of my Country, but nothing short of a Loss of my senses or death can possibly prevent me. So that if I am troublesome to you you must ascribe it a love of country. Please to present some of the cream of my love to Mrs. Mangum & her children, & believe me to be your undeviating & unshaken friend."

On another occasion Chavis wrote:<sup>62</sup>

I myself was insulted a few days ago. A certain gentleman came into my schoolhouse and told me to my face that he believed that you were a nullifier and I gave him a shot upon the spot and sent him off hopping. You may blame me for that if you will, but when you are assailed I will speak right or wrong—no matter who it is, and if I never see you again I am unshaken.

Chavis never hesitated to rebuke Mangum. On one occasion he wrote:<sup>63</sup>

Is it my colour, or my insignificance or the gross ignorance, which my many letters contain, is the reason why you have never condescended to answer one of them? Or is it your distrust of my professed firm, unshaken, unabating friendship to be not worth your notice? Be it as it may, I must plainly & honestly tell you that I have ever been grieved, that you were the professed political friend of G [General] Jackson, because I ever believed him to be expressly what he has proved himself to be . . . and you as an honest statesman (as I believe you to be) cannot keep sides with him any longer, therefore put on again, your full coat of Federalism, and not only support the election of Clay, but go forth to Congress with a full determination to support the renewal of the United States bank, to trample under foot the doctrine of Nullification, to support the tariff in its main bulwarks, and to support Internal improvements, in a word to prove that you are an American in the full sense of the word. . . . You know that you have been for some time hoping [sic] and shifting about, showing your coat, to be sometimes Federalism, sometimes Democracy, sometimes Republicanism. Now you know that wont do. . . .

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Mangum, July 30, 1833.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Mangum, September 3, 1831.



The following year, Chavis asked Mangum to give his "respects to my son—Abraham Rencher & to Gen. Barringer—& tell them I w<sup>d</sup> be glad to receive a letter from them. Tell them if I am Black I am free born American & a revolutionary soldier & therefore ought not to be thrown entirely out of the scale of notice."<sup>64</sup>

The next year Chavis again showed his impatience with Mangum's failure to write:<sup>65</sup> "As no man is his own keeper, nor does he know what is to come, therefore I will not make a positive promise, but my present impression is that this shall be the last letter I ever will write to you, untill I get one from you I would not write this, if it was not owing to genuine friendship founded upon Mrs. Mangum & her children—I wish you to tell her, that the die is cast, I cannot come to Teach for her. I have built a school house and have made arrangements to be stationary at home." Mangum must have written to Chavis shortly afterwards,<sup>66</sup> for on August 8 Chavis wrote: "Your very friendly and satisfactory letter came to hand yesterday, and I embrace the earliest moment to answer it—"

There was nothing extraordinary about Mangum's failure to answer the letters of Chavis. Priestly Mangum himself took his brother to task for "inattention to epistolary writing. None of us receive letters from you; and altho' that may be an argument in favor of your impartiality, yet it affords neither evidence of your friendship for us—or any sure guaranty for building up friendship in others."<sup>67</sup>

From the authentic information available it is not clear where or when John Chavis was born; it is not certain that he attended Princeton; he probably attended for a time the institution that grew into Washington and Lee University; he was a Presbyterian minister in Virginia and in North Carolina; he was doubtless an impressive and effective teacher, if Joseph Gales can be believed; but if the minutes of the Lexington Presbytery are to be accepted Chavis may not have been as good at Latin as some of his brief biographers have reported, although the inference suggested in footnote 24 may not be fair. And if he did not have Willie P. Mangum as a pupil, the extraordinary relation that seems to have existed between the Negro and the senator is difficult to explain, even in the absence of authentic written records that Mangum went to school to Chavis.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to Mangum, March 10, 1832.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to Mangum, July 21, 1832.

<sup>66</sup> In the Mangum papers there is no letter from him to Chavis.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from Priestly Mangum to Willie P. Mangum, February 6, 1835.