

The Known History of William Hunter, Weaver of Nansemond

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In 1685, during the reign of James II, William Hunter, the immigrant ancestor in this line of American Hunters, arrived in the upper parish of Nansemond County, Virginia. The land on which he settled is in the coastal Albemarle region and the native homeland of the Nansemond, the Meherrin, and the Chowanac Indians. In 1728 after the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina was resurveyed, the land of the Nansemond Hunters lay within Chowan County, North Carolina. Today the old Hunter tracts are near the town of Sunbury, in Gates County.

A number of researchers have theorized that William Hunter, a weaver by profession, was Scottish, since his surname is Scottish and since sheep-raising Scots were noted for textile production. Since the names of William Hunter and his son Nicholas recur in parish records of Alwick, Northumbria, perhaps he was Northumbrian. Some have claimed that he and William Hunter of Sandwich and Barnstable, Massachusetts, were the same person. The two Williams' surviving records are from the same years of the early eighteenth century, and a few family names are common in the two families. One key to identifying William of Nansemond is his four sons, Nicholas, William, Robert, and Isaac.

In 2011, the Barnstable/Nansemond theory was disproved. Commissioned by Still Hunter, Jr. (a descendant of William's son Nicholas), Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG, and Melinde Lutz Byrne, FASG, undertook an analytical investigation of the Sandwich records. Their research concludes that William Hunter and his wife Rebecca Besse did not leave Massachusetts and were not the contemporary settlers of Nansemond. The documented list of their known children (Elisha, William, Allse, Thomas, Jonathan, and Rebecca) does not include a Nicholas, Robert, or Isaac, children of William of Nansemond, whose bequests to sons Nicholas and Robert can be documented. Implications in the Massachusetts will of William, a son of William and Rebecca Hunter of Barnstable/Sandwich, are that William and Rebecca were living together in Massachusetts in 1715, not in Nansemond: ("I give and bequeath to my honored father William Hunter, whome I make & Ordain my Sole Executor to this my Last Will & Testament . . . and one half of my estate to be to Rebeckah my Honored mother . . ." *Plymouth County Probate, copybook 4, pp. 214-215, will, probate, and inventory of William Hunter of Situate, mariner, 14 July 1715, Massachusetts Judicial Archives, Columbia Point*).

Other research suggests that William Hunter of Nansemond, like many other immigrants, may have come to Virginia from Barbados, England's richest colony in the seventeenth century. Barbados served as a midstation for many who hoped to settle on the Colonial mainland. A William Hunter is documented there in 1679 as serving in the Barbadian militia: "List of ye Souldiours undr my Command and to whom they doe

belong taken at a Muster ye 6th of this Instant January with defaults for nonappearance that Day . . . William Hunter” (*James Brandow, Omitted Chapters from Hotten’s, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1982, p. 115*).

William Hunter of Isle of Wight County, Virginia, another contemporaneous William whom some wrongly have surmised to be William of Nansemond, also can be deleted from the list of claimants. Names of legatees in his will remove him from consideration: his wife Elizabeth, his daughters Mary, Ann, and Martha, and his brother James, none of whom is in the Nansemond line. He died on 29 April 1820 (*Blanche Adams Chapman, Wills and Administrations of Isle of Wight County, Virginia, 1647-1800. Vol. Two. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1975, p. 2*).

Another William Hunter, a very promising candidate discovered by Martha Rester, is recorded in *The Register Book of Ingleby iuxta Grenhow . . . since the Yeare of Our Lord 1539*, compiled by John Blackburne from the original registry of births, christenings, and weddings (*Cambridge: Cross & Jackson, 1889*). Ingleby Greenhow is in North Riding of Yorkshire and west of Northumbria. A child named William Hunter was born there in the town of Battersby. The registry, which also includes several entries for Rountree, a family closely associated with the Hunters of Nansemond, reports that Nicholas Hunter and Ellen Wood were married in 1637. On 26 November 1639 daughter Mary (“Maria”) was born to “Nicholai Hunter de Battersbye.” On 23 May, Elizabeth, daughter of “Nicholai Hunter de Battersby,” was born. On 21 June 1643, “Elizabeth ‘infans vel ab ubere pendens,’ ” (“an infant, or still nursing [‘hanging from the breast’],” daughter of Nicholas Hunter, was buried. On 9 May 1644, Henry “fil of Nicholai Hunter,” was born. On 12 April 1646, Sara “fil of Nicholai Hunter,” was born. On 12 September 1648, Rebecca, “fil of Nicholai Hunter,” was born. In 1651 (no month or date is given) Dinah, “fil of Nicholai Hunter,” was born. On 14 November 1653, William, “son of Nicholas Hunter,” was born. If this is William of Nansemond, he would have been thirty-two in 1685, the year his name appeared on Charles Rountree’s Virginia patent. Since the son of William of Nansemond also was named Nicholas and was included as a headright on Rountree’s patent [*Ed. Note: Other researchers believe that the Nicholas on the Rountree patent was William (weaver’s) brother, not his son*], evidently the name Nicholas was continuing the tradition prevalent in British and Colonial families of naming the first-born in honor of his paternal grandfather.

At present, the earliest unquestionable evidence shows that William Hunter was among seven persons Charles Rountree transported to “Up. Par. Of Nanzamund . . . by the Scypress SW.” Rountree’s land patent, dated 4 November 1685, lists “Willm. Hunter, Nicho. Hunter, Joane Hunter, Charles Rountree, Robert Rountree, Rebecka Hunter, John Sayre” (*Virginia Patent Book Seven, p. 487*). Rountree was granted fifty acres for each of these persons he brought into the county. Later records prove that Nicholas was William’s son [*Ed. Note: Other researchers believe that this Nicholas was William’s brother, not his son*]. The patent does not specify William Hunter’s place of origin, nor does it identify Joane, Rebecca, or John Sayre, but in the birth

records of Ingleby, Yorkshire, “Rebecca” is the name of William Hunter’s sister. It recurs as the name of the wife of William’s son Nicholas.

On 21 April 1695 William Hunter, identified as “William Hunter of Nansemond weaver,” was granted a patent of his own, “200 acres on the eastward side of the main cypress swamp that runs out of Bennetts Creek,” for having imported four Negro slaves (*Virginia Patent Book Eight*, p. 43). The patent suggests that within ten years William had become sufficiently prosperous to acquire four slaves and his own land. Appropriately in this land transaction, William does not claim himself as a headright, since Rountree already had claimed him in the patent of 1685. In his will William Hunter would bequeath this tract to his son Robert.

Before the end of the century William had risen in prominence. On 8 June 1699 he was listed as one of twelve justices of the quorum in Nansmond County (*Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, I, June 1894, p. 232, as cited from records in the *British Public Records Office*). With prominence came prosperity, for William may have financed an immigration voyage for his son’s family. This seems evident from another patent the Crown granted to William on 25 April 1702. It consisted of 240 acres adjoining his tract in Upper parish on the southeastern side of Meherrin Swamp. To this land “beginning at a white oak standing on a small branch or corner tree of a patent formerly granted to ye sd. Hunter” he transported five persons claimed as headrights: “Wm. Hunter [son of William the weaver] & his wife & his daughter Alice & his son Nicho. Hunter [*Other researchers believe this Nicholas was William’s son, not his grandson*], [and] Mary Cohon [her identity is unknown, although her surname links with Hunters in the parish of Alnwick, Northumbria]” (*Virginia Patent Book Nine*, pp. 309-310). Virginia’s headright system allowed a person to be a headright only one time. As a justice of the quorum, William would have known the illegality of his identifying himself as a headright on this third patent bearing his name. This tract he would bequeath to his son Nicholas.

In the late seventeenth century the population of Nansemond County was small. In 1699 it was 2,571 (*William A. Kretzschmar et al. handbook of the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and Atlantic States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 327). In his community William was listed among magistrates and militia officers (*Cecil Hedlam, ed. Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series. Vol. 2: America and West Indies, Jan.-Dec. 1, 1702, Preserved in Public Record Office [Vaduz: Draus Reprint Ltd., 1964], first published in London: HMSO, 1912, pp. 155-160*).

From 1702 to 1714 William continued to serve as a “clerk,” or justice of the quorum (*Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, June 1894, p. 368). One surviving document from 25 May 1702 provides a glimpse of Judge William Hunter on the bench. “Mary Williams of Nansemond Co., Va., complained to the Board of Wm Hunter of Lowr parish of Nansemond Co. did on ye 16 instant send Constable to her house and take away her child and contrary to law bound him for 21 years. . . .” (*Executive journals, Council of Colonial Virginia. Vol. Two, p. 245, quoted in Filmore Norfleet Papers, Virginia State Library*).

Another public record underlines William's prominence and his sizable land holdings. It identifies him as "captain," possibly for heading a militia company: "Captain William Hunter" was enumerated in *A Compleat List of the Rent Roll of the Land in Nansemond County in anno 1704*, with 800 acres (*The Quit Rents of Virginia, compiled and alphabetized by Annie Laurie Wright Smith, 1957*).

William Hunter is documented as a witness to the transfer of a patent dated 19 October 1700, when Nicholas Stallings sold Robert Rountree of Nansemond County a tract on Bennetts Creek (*J. R. B. Hathaway, ed. The North Carolina Historical and Genealogical Register. Vol. One, January 1900, p. 89*). A land patent dated 7 November 1700 assigned John Moor 481 acres in the "Up Par. of Nansemond Co. on both sides of Holmes' Br. & the Oysterlongs Br.," adjacent to land of William Hunter (*Virginia Patent Book Nine, p. 38*). Another patent, granted to William Sumner and dated 14 June 1714, records that William Hunter owned land adjacent to Sumner's sixty-eight acres in the "Up. Par. of Nansemond Co. at a place called Gordon's Marsh at Orapeak" (*Virginia Patent Book Ten, p. 141*).

A Chowan County deed mentions that Thomas Rountree, attorney for Nicholas Hunter and his wife Rebecca of Carteret County, North Carolina, transferred on 17 March 1729 from Nicholas to his son William Hunter, the land cited as a bequest to Nicholas from his father William Hunter: ". . . one hundred & twenty acres more or less being part of a patent formerly granted to Wm. Hunter, late of the Upper Parish of Nansemond, deceased, father of the afsd. Nicks Hunter, party to these presents as by patent from the authority of Virginia bearing date the 25 of April 1701 [1702], doth & may appear, & by the last will & testament of the afsd Wm. Hunter deceased descended to Nics. Hunter: (*Chowan Deed Book C 1, pp. 599-601*).

William's will, destroyed perhaps in courthouse fires that burned the Nansemond records, may have been signed ca. 1729. The lost will is mentioned again in an indenture dated 16 February 1742, in which William's son Robert Hunter sold his brother Isaac a tract their father had passed to Robert: "the said land being part of two patents the first being a patent formerly granted to William Hunter late of the upper parish of Nansemond deceased being lawful father of the aforesaid Isaac Hunter and Robert Hunter both the parties for the quantity of two hundred acres as by a patent being dated the twenty first day of April which was in the year of our Lord Christ sixteen hundred and ninety five both and may appear and by the last will & testament of the said William Hunter deceased to his son Robert Hunter" (*Chowan Deed Book A, pp. 257-259*).

In 1728, when the border between Virginia and North Carolina was redrawn, the new configuration placed many southern Virginia tracts within North Carolina. In 1727 Judge William Hunter was still serving in the courts, but in Elizabeth City County, Virginia. Is this judge the same person as Judge William Hunter of Nansemond? Were there two contemporaneous William Hunters in the judiciaries of the Albemarle? In 1729, a report titled "The Present State of Virginia with respect to the Colony in

General” the name William Hunter is missing from the list of Nansemond justices, but it is included as “William Hunters [sic]” among Elizabeth City County’s fifteen justices of the peace and justices of the quorum (*English Duplicates of Lost Virginia Records, compiled by Louis des Cognets, Jr., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1958, p. 45—records des Cognets researched in the British Public Records Office*). In that year this William Hunter also became a member of the “peace commission”: “On the application of the Justices of Elizabeth City County it is ordered that Edward Jones, William Hunter, John Brodie and William Westwood Gent be added to the Commission of the peace for the said county (*Executive Journals of the Council of Virginia. Vol. Four, October 25, 1721-October 28, 1739*), published by the Virginia State Library, 1930, p. 151). If this Judge Hunter is William the weaver of Nansemond, he died not long after he was added to the Elizabeth City County council.

William’s name proliferated in his descendants, and other William Hunters in the weaver’s immediate family survived him. His son William’s will was signed in Chowan County in 1732 and witnessed by his brothers Robert and Isaac. The weaver’s grandson named William became a burgess in the Virginia House of Burgesses. These two Williams would be the William Hunters whose names appear in the St. Paul Parish vestry minutes and in the Albermarle’s public reports after 1729.

Such, then, are the few extant records of William Hunter, immigrant, weaver, justice of the quorum, magistrate, captain, and freeholder of Nansemond. Genealogists searching for additional history of Judge Hunter and the Hunters of Nansemond perhaps will find documents among Colonial records in the Public Records Office in London or in the historical holdings of various English counties.

Researched and reported by Hunter M. Cole, November 2012

Biography:

Hunter Cole is a great-great-great-great-great-great grandson of William Hunter of Nansemond. After a quarter century in publishing, Cole retired in 2003 and spent the following seven years documenting the Hunter genealogy in collaboration with Martha Rester, creating the web site "The Hunters of Nansemond: The Family of James Alston Hunter and Martha Harris Hunter," and researching the Legs Murder, Mississippi's great crime story of the 1930s. His book The Legs Murder Scandal was published in 2010 and reprinted in 2012. He lives at Cole Ridge Farm near Brandon, Mississippi.