

Notes on William Hunter Jr.

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[This article was first published in *The Jacob Hunter Trust Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. January 2018]

N.B. *The conjectures in this biographical report need further research and documented proof before being accepted as definitive. H. M. C.*

During the two centuries following the discovery of America, navigators coming to the New World unlocked secrets of ocean currents and of trade winds and by mastering them steered their vessels to the Colonies with shiploads of immigrants and goods.

An established route from southern England took ships southward to the Canary Islands, a stopover haven for replenishing water and food. Eastern winds then blew the ships toward Barbados, once England's richest colony, for a second stop. Afterwards the route took ships north through the Caribbean Sea, toward Chesapeake Bay, and to ports in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas. West winds carried ships loaded with New World cargo back to England via a more northerly route. This west-east journey was established as the safest and quickest way to and from England's southern colonies, although occasionally the favored sea lane was blocked or impeded by pirates, foreign enemies, and storms.

It is plausible to believe that, like a multitude of other immigrants, the earliest ancestors in the Hunter family of Nansemond County, Virginia, and Chowan County, North Carolina, came from England to America by this common route. Research of this family has focused on William Hunter as the first immigrant ancestor. One early document, *A Compleat List of the Rent Roll of the Land in Nansemond County in anno 1704*, includes "Cap't William Hunter" who was taxed on 800 acres. Some have assumed that this William Hunter, documented as early as 1699 as a "Justice of the Quorum" and a clerk of the court in Nansemond (*Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, I, June 1894, 232), was a militia officer by virtue of the designation of captain on the quitrent roll and that he was both Captain William Hunter and Judge William Hunter.

Before 1699 he had been less prominent. By profession he had been a weaver, as he is identified in a land patent of 21 April 1695 (*Virginia Patent Book Eight*, p. 431), but he rose in status to the notable position of jurist and was a freeholder with a midsized tract of land. However, other than the rent roll, there are no records showing that he owned property so large as the eight hundred acres stated in the roll. The patent of 1695 awarded him two hundred acres, fifty for each headright, for having transported four Negroes (Alla, Harry, Shambo, and Ned) into the colony. He may have bought them off a slave ship. Thereafter, the patent of 1701 increased his land holdings by 250 acres, for a total of 450.

In 1704, the year of the quitrent roll, two William Hunters can be documented as residents in Nansemond County. Both were freeholders, but since only one William is listed on the roll, the copyist compiling the roster mistakenly may have totaled the combined acreage of the two Williams and cited it only under the name of "Cap't William Hunter." But the jurist and the captain were two distinct men. The jurist was the father, and the captain was his son, a shipmaster, and thus was Captain William Hunter, Jr. Surviving documentation in land transactions of two other sons (Nicholas

and Robert) reveals that at the time of his death William Hunter the weaver-judge owned only 450 acres, which is the total of the acreage awarded to him in his two land patents of 1695 and 1701. The remaining 350 acres of the quoted 800 would have been the land owned by his son, Captain William Hunter Jr., whose holdings were situated at Orapeake, a creek and a swamp that the Mosley Map of 1733 shows to be immediately south of the new Virginia-North Carolina boundary line, west of the Great Dismal Swamp, and north of Horsepool. The father's land on Bennett's Creek, identified on this map as "Hunter" and in the possession of the judge's descendants, was located south of Orapeake. Both the father's and the son's tracts, formerly in Virginia, were within Chowan Precinct, North Carolina, after 1728, the year of the new survey.

During the late 1600s and early 1700s, if Capt. William Hunter of Chowan was indeed a ship's captain, or shipmaster, rather than a militia captain, it can be reasoned that he had served on various English and Colonial American vessels during his career. These may have been merchant ships or slave ships. As the senior officer he would have maintained logs detailing day-by-day events. A ship captain's hand became accustomed to the required daily record keeping. It is evident that William Hunter Jr.'s bold signature on his will (Chowan 1732), even though written when he was frail and near his last days, is that of a man seasoned in writing in prominent, clear penmanship. Genealogists tracing Captain William Hunter can hope that some of the navigational records detailing his life at sea may be extant in England and America, for ship building and sea trade were lucrative professions in both places.

If William the weaver-jurist's son did become a sea captain (or shipmaster), it is reasonable to conclude that he had risen through the lower ranks of service, probably in the merchant marines rather than in the Royal navy. Likely he began his career at the lowest rank but by aptitude and diligence was fortunate to rise from common seaman or cabin boy to shipmaster. His name, recorded during his boyhood, may appear on some yet undiscovered roll of seaman apprentices. In England, boys and girls from poor families and as young as seven years of age were signed into various apprenticeships, and young William Hunter may have been one of these unfortunates. Inhumane as this practice may seem by modern-day standards, pauper children were entrusted to tradesmen or guilds so that they would not starve at home.

A possible site for beginning a genealogical search for William Jr. is Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, a coastal, sea-shipping city where William Hunter Sr. may have lived and worked in the weaver's trade before immigrating to Virginia. The register of All Saints church at Newcastle links the Hunter and Rountree names in the marriage of one William Hunter to Margaret Gowntree [sic] on 13 February 1659. This bridegroom could be the future weaver-jurist, and the bride could be a member of the Rountree family with whom the Hunters were affiliated in Nansemond and Chowan.

A problematic mystery for Hunter genealogists is the absence of William Jr. from his family group as they are listed in the Rountree land patent of 1685, the earliest record documenting the immigrant Hunters in Nansemond County (*Virginia Patent Book Seven*, p. 487). Charles Rountree's patent shows that he transported William Hunter, Joane Hunter, Rebekah Hunter, and Nicholas Hunter to the Virginia colony as headrights. William and Nicholas prove to be father and son [*Ed. Note:*

Other family researchers believe this Nicholas is William's brother, not his son]. Although no known documentation exists, some have surmised Joane to be William's wife and the mother of Nicholas. Some suppose that Rebekah could be William Sr.'s spinster sister. However, without proof these female Hunters' identities are not definitive. The known son named William is not included in the 1685 patent as one of Rountree's headrights. Where was he? It is not likely that the youngster would have been abandoned on his own in England.

In 1701, sixteen years having passed since the Hunters were first mentioned in Virginia records, William Hunter, Rountree's headright in 1685, was granted his second land patent in his own name *[Other researchers believe that this patent was for William's son, William, not the father who was Rountree's headright]* for transporting these family members into Virginia as headrights: William Hunter, "his wife," his son Nicholas Hunter, and his daughter Alice. Most experienced Hunter genealogists agree that this second William is William Jr. and is the William also termed Captain William Hunter. In these early years of the new century he has been reunited with his family in Nansemond.

A christening record in Rochester, Kent, may provide a valuable clue about his whereabouts after his parents left England. Rochester, an English city on the River Medway, may have been his home during the early years of his marriage. On 24 June 1688 an infant named Nicholas, the son of William Hunter and his wife Ann, was christened at St. Nicholas Church in Rochester. If this child is the same person as the young Nicholas Hunter named as a headright on the weaver-judge's 1701 land patent, the boy would have been about thirteen when he came to Virginia, and his father would be William Hunter Jr., whose wife, according to his will and to hers was named Ann. *[Other researchers believe the Nicholas in William's 1701 patent was his son, not his grandson].* These names from Rochester match names of the Hunter family later of Nansemond and Chowan.

Where had William Jr. been during the sixteen years between 1685 and 1701? Occasionally with his wife and children but possibly most often on board English vessels. He first would have been in apprenticeship and thereafter would have served as a merchant sailor who rose to be a master. This conjecture is not preposterous.

In her book *Nansemond Chronicles* Evelyn Cross makes an undocumented statement that William Hunter Jr. was captured by the French on the high seas in 1705 and was a prisoner in Paris until 1708 (p. 77). There is no reason to believe that her assertion is untrue. Why should she fabricate such information? But without provable documentation it remains legend rather than fact. However, William Hunter's role as a shipmaster can be moved forward by documentation found in the British Public Records Office: In "a list of ships entering inwards in York River from 14th November 1701 to 25th March 1702" this entry is recorded: "*Happy Return of Boston*, Square Stern, built New England 1699, 22 Tons, William Hunter, Master, Robert Brisco etc., Owners" (Cited by Louis des Cognets, Jr., *English Duplicates of Lost Virginia Records*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1982, p. 298). Another source, an Internet site (<http://www.piratewalks.co.uk/news>), classifies the *Happy Return* as a slave ship: "The slavers *Happy Return* and *Joseph and Thomas* were both captured by the French off Africa at Christmas 1709, but the *Joseph and*

Thomas was later retaken in the Caribbean by an English ship. Half the twenty British slavers that sailed in 1710 were lost.”

It can be concluded that after his imprisonment William Hunter returned to Virginia. During the close of his career in seafaring, Captain Hunter established an American home in the part of Nansemond County’s Upper Parish that, after the boundary between the two colonies was redrawn in 1728, would become a segment of Chowan Precinct, North Carolina. Before 1704, still a seafarer, the captain had acquired the aforementioned tract at Orapeake. He may have purchased this land, for there is no record of a patent granted in his name. One other known source documents Captain Hunter at Orapeake. In 1714 his neighbor William Sumner was awarded a land patent of sixty-eight acres at Orapeake, described in the patent as being adjacent to William Hunter’s land (*Virginia Patent Book Ten*, p. 129).

Judge William Hunter, the patriarch, died ca. 1728, the year of the survey, and in 1729, two William Hunters are listed on the retroactive tax roll of rezoned lands in Chowan County (formerly part of Nansemond). One of these would be Captain William Hunter, with 335 acres, the other his son William, with 166 acres. The patriarch’s 450 acres had been bequests to his sons Nicholas and Robert. Therefore, he is not one of the Williams on the retroactive list. Captain Hunter’s tax is £6,6,1, the son’s £2,18,4 (*Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 26, p. 256). On 6 April 1722 either Captain William Hunter or his son William acquired additional land, 385 acres on Cabin Branch and Hell’s Pocosin (*Chowan Book III*, p. 98).

The captain’s birth year can be estimated, but the actual date is not known. Some assume that he was the eldest child, born in the 1660s. Before 1685 his parents and brother Nicholas migrated to Virginia, leaving him, as can be speculated, as a juvenile seaman apprentice. By 1702 he had advanced to shipmaster and by 1704 he also was a freeholder in Nansemond. In 1705 or 1709 he was a French prisoner. He had married a spouse named Ann, and they were parents of a son and a daughter born in England. Six additional children (two boys and four girls) would be born in Nansemond or Chowan. In his years as a landlubber he owned a mill and a plantation farm, but, as his will implies, evidently he was not a slaveholder at the time he died.

Captain Hunter signed the will in 4 January 1732. “Sick and weak but of perfect mind, senses, and memory,” he accepts his fate and devotes his soul to God and his remains to a Christian burial. He leaves his “dearly beloved” widow a third of his personal estate. He leaves the mill and his lands and tenements in Chowan, equally divided but not specified, to two sons, William and Ephraim. No mention is made of son Nicholas, who had come with him to Nansemond in 1701 [*Likely because the Nicholas who came in 1701 was his brother, not his son*]. Likely Nicholas is deceased. The will names his “five loving daughters”—Judith, Ann, Easter (Hester), Allise (Alice), and Mary. With the exception of Alice, who must be a spinster or widow of at least thirty-one or thirty-two, the daughters are underage, but at eighteen or upon marriage each will receive “three likely cows and calves, and two likely ewes and lambs.” William’s brothers Isaac and Robert Hunter, along with Spencer Cole, witness as William signs the will. He dies sometime during the next thirteen days, and the will is probated in Chowan court in Edenton on 18 January.

The captain’s widow signed her will on 4 May 1749 in the presence of her son William and an unidentified John Parker. She leaves sons William and Ephraim her

“whole stock of hogs,” including a number that have run wild in the swamp, and appoints William and her son-in-law Edward Arnal executors. She leaves her daughters “an equal proportion of all & every part of my whole movable estate except what is before excepted.” Three of the daughters have been married during the seventeen years since their father’s death. Alice, who was a headright in her grandfather’s land patent of 1701, has married Edward Arnal, one of Ann’s executors. Alice and her mother are the last of the English-born family members. Ann dies in 1751, and the will is probated in that year in August [“8ber”] court.

Captain William Hunter, Jr.: A Time Line

- 1659 Marriage of William Hunter and Margaret Gowntree at Newcastle
- 1660s Conjectured as the time William Hunter Jr. was born.
- 1685 Members of William Sr.’s family, but not William Jr., are listed as Rountree’s headrights.
- 1695 William Sr. transports four slaves as headrights into Nansemond.
- 1699 William Sr. is a court clerk and Justice of the Quorum in Nansemond.
- 1701 William Sr. transports William Jr. and William Jr.’s family into Nansemond as headrights.
- 1702 Captain William Hunter, shipmaster, brings his ship into the York River of Virginia.
- 1704 Captain William Hunter appears on the quitrent roll as a freeholder in Nansemond.
- 1705 (or 1709) Captain William Hunter, captured at sea by the French, is imprisoned in Paris.
- 1714 William Jr.’s acreage at Orapeake is listed adjacent to William Sumner’s land.
- 1722 William Jr. (or his son) acquires 385 acres on Cabin Branch and Hell’s Pocosin.
- 1728 William Sr. dies; the new boundary between Virginia and North Carolina is determined.
- 1729 William Jr.’s land is mentioned on that year’s tax roll of Chowan.
- 1732 William Jr. signs his will in Chowan and dies.
- 1749 Ann, William Jr.’s widow, signs her will in Chowan and dies in 1751.

[Editor’s note: Mr. Cole requested that this report be considered conjectures that require further research and collaboration. Other family historians do not believe that Capt. William Hunter was the William Hunter, son of our immigrant William (weaver). Given the paucity of early records, it is difficult to establish direct links. Other researchers posit that our William Hunter, “the Burgess,” spent most of his life in Nansemond County and served for years in the House of Burgesses, and therefore could not have been the same Capt. William Hunter who was captured by the French.]