

Former slave left 'legacy' as preacher

By HENRY KING

Whether you're black or whether you're white, you probably don't know much about the history of black people in Randolph County.

Each February, including this one, I wonder why someone doesn't profile a black person of Randolph's past to feature during Black History Month.

Overhead
And
Underfoot



Who are the blacks famous in Randolph County history?

Maybe all the records are lost, you figure.

Maybe, you think, no black person gained fame in all the annals of early Randolph lore.

I raised these same questions and speculated about the matter as early as 1971 when I offered my own candidate for local Black History Week.

A man whose sole name was Ralph because he was a slave. When he got his freedom, he took the phrase Free Man and combined it into Freeman as a last name.

Maybe I ought to refresh your memory.

Back in the early 1880's, Ralph Freeman was an important man, a mighty "big" man in Randolph County. That was because he was an elder, a delegate to Sandy Creek Baptist Church, the mother church of southern Baptists.

Sandy Creek Church is near Melancton in northeast Randolph County. A state historical marker along old N.C. 49 brings it to attention of travelers.

There is nothing on that sign or other local plaques to mention Ralph Freeman, but in a now rare, 1859 book called a history of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association, there is a chapter about Elder Ralph Freeman.

He's called Ralph in the book. Back in those days he called himself that too. He even signed his name that way.

A black elder in the early 1800's in Randolph County? Preaching at a "white" church? All this 50 years or so before the Civil War?

Yes indeed.

Ralph Freeman made his mark on the world, even though he seemingly became a long-forgotten man in the annals of black history hereabouts.

I first became deeply interested in Ralph's story many years ago when I visited Gaddy's Goose Pond in Anson County and also stopped at Ansonville to walk through an old cemetery.

In the wooded area away from the rest of the graves was a small, pink tombstone with "Ralph" engraved on top.

The legend on the face of the stone indicated "He died about 1838. He was a Primitive Baptist (sic) preacher of much force and usefulness. His freedom was purchased by the Bear Creek Association. Erected 1907."

When I saw the tombstone I knew I had found additional information about "Ralph," an early Randolph County church official.

It was surprising to realize he didn't even get a headstone until nearly 70 years after he died.

Elder Ralph is described in an old church book as a "colored man" who "at first was a slave belonging to a man in Anson County."

Soon after making a profession of religion and being baptized, it was discovered he had an impression to preach. He was thus "licensed" by the church of which he was a member.

His owner proposed to sell him, and his brethren of the time bought and gave him his freedom. Oral history had it that he took the last name Freeman because he was a free man under the law as constituted at that time.

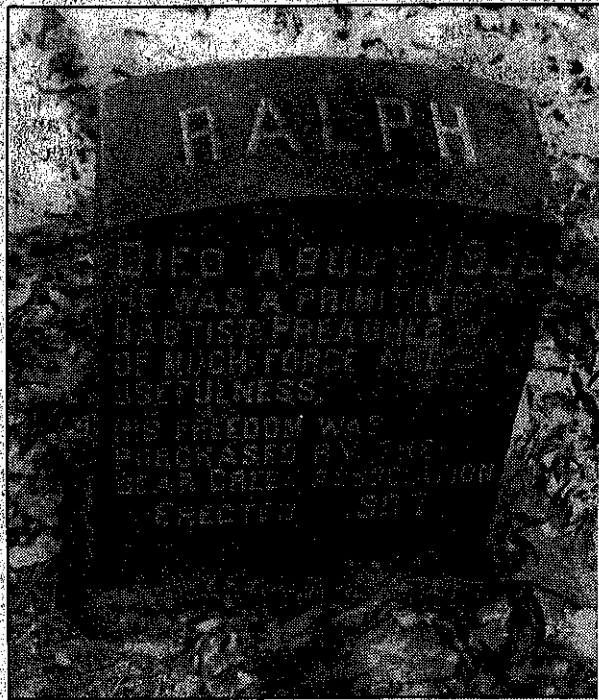
Soon after, he was ordained in the work of the ministry.

Ralph Freeman traveled and preached a

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R.C. BRACKS, HIS

Wilmington, North Carolina



Staff Photo By Henry King

Gravestone of former slave

good deal in Randolph, Moore, Montgomery, Anson, and Davidson counties. He often attended business sessions of the Sandy Creek Association, for as an elder he was a delegate in the organization.

He was in Randolph County as a delegate on Oct. 24, 1807, as one of many documented instances, and the running texts of the association history credit him with the honors of doing the preaching many times.

He was considered an able preacher, was often called on to preach at funerals and to frequently administer the ordinance of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

He simply called himself Ralph but he was indeed a big man in Randolph County Baptist circles and because Sandy Creek was the mother church of the southern Association, his name was known across state lines, too.

Elder Joseph Magee, a white Baptist minister, became his warm friend and preached with him. History points out that such was their attachments for each other that they agreed that the surviving one would preach the funeral of the one that died first.

"Elder Magee moved to the west, and died first. Upon his deathbed he bequeathed to Ralph his riding horse, overcoat, Bible, \$50 in cash and requested his family send for Ralph to come and preach his funeral.

In company with a white brother of the faith, Ralph went west by horse and buggy and preached the text the deceased had selected.

At the end of the sermon Elder Magee's brother told the assembly what provisions his brother had made for Ralph and added if any one would like to increase the amount, please feel free to do so.

The congregation soon made up an additional \$50. While this was being turned over, a Methodist came up and handed Ralph another dollar. A Presbyterian who observed it said, "You ought not to give Ralph anything more." "Why not?" asked the Methodist. "Because," said the Presbyterian, "He has torn your system all to pieces." The Methodist replied, "I believe he has preached the truth and I will give him the dollar."

There is a great deal more to the personage of Ralph Freeman and history will someday "out" but a footnote not to be forgotten by any one is that when the state Legislature passed a law prohibiting colored men from preaching, Ralph was greatly mortified.

Not only did the Legislature interfere with matters of church and state, but it took away Ralph's right to freedom of speech.

But Ralph Freeman was a forgiving man.

He died in full assurance of blessed immortality, contemporaries said.

That's Ralph Freeman for you.

The last time I saw his grave, about three years ago, it was amid briars and honeysuckle.

It would be nice if a contingent of Randolph folks would go down to Bethlehem Cemetery at Ansonville, clean up his mound, place a potted plant and pay homage to Ralph's resting place in the woods.

He deserves it on the 150th anniversary of his death and especially during Black History Month.

(Courier-Tribune columnist Henry King writes "Overhead & Underfoot" each week.)