



The Chatham Historical Journal

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December 2007

Letters from Home. . .

[These letters, given to the Chatham County Historical Association by Virginia McGee* of Houston, Texas, were accompanied by these notes about family history. Additional notes may be found on the next page.]

Here are the letters to my great-uncle John Wesley Hanks: four from his father, Dr. John A. Hanks, and three from his stepmother, Catherine Walker Hanks. In transcribing them I used their punctuation and spelling as nearly as possible. As you can see, there are missing portions [in the originals], also some parts I just couldn't decipher. . . .

You will note that my great-grandfather was quite outspoken in expressing his opinions, including some rather racist ones. However, that is probably understandable considering the times in which the letters were written. His wife's letters were more involved with gossip and family problems, but surely nobody would be offended by her remarks after all these years.

John Hanks married Euphemia Morris when she was only sixteen, and she died at the age of twenty-seven, after the birth of her seventh child. The next year he married Catherine Walker, who had the unenviable task of raising her husband's young family, and they had three more children.

Of their children, Louise Hanks Underwood, my grandmother, died before I was born, as did her brother John, to whom these letters are addressed. However, I remember quite well the oldest sibling, Virginia Taylor and her husband, Jim Taylor. They loved North Carolina, talked about Pittsboro all the time, and taught me a poem about the "Old North State," which I was called upon to recite on every visit to them.

*Virginia McGee of Houston, Texas, has been a member of CCHA since 1999. Her donation of letters from Dr. and Mrs. Hanks was gratefully received in 1998.

Pittsboro

Dec. 19th /66

My Dear John:

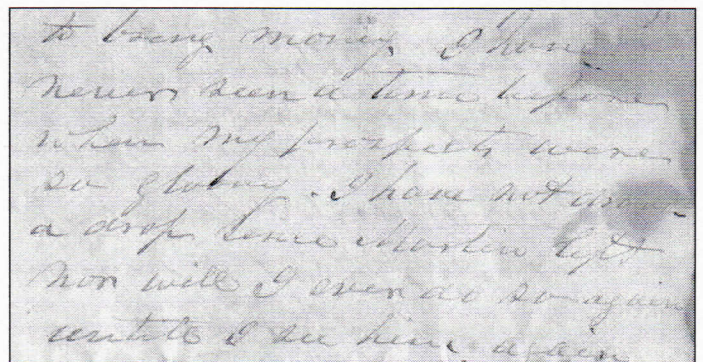
After an age [page torn] that I have been delayed in writing to you or to anyone else, it pleased the giver of all good gifts to restore me to my present state of vision, which barely permits me to see sufficiently well to write or read after I have written, but I am thankful for this much and hope there is a steady improvement going on. . . .

I am obliged to you for the little deerskin. I shall try to have it dressed properly. How I wish I was out in Texas for a short time at least to try my hand on geese deer and prairie hens but alas there is a great gulf between us, which is almost impassable; perhaps a better day may dawn before I get too old.

Dear Son I want you to supervise Martin while [he is under] your eye, & endeavor to assist him in making a man of himself as he says he intends to do— If he gets a situation see to it that he gets among moral young men.

. . . My dear boy I hope you will continue to merit & deserve the kind treatment you have received at the hands of your uncle. . . . I have a good practice but get no money. . . . there is no [money] here nor is there anything to bring money. I have never seen a time before where my prospects were so gloomy. I have not drank a drop since Martin left nor will I ever do so again until I see him again. I must close as my eyes seem to fail & I can't see the lines. Good night.

Your affectionate father
J A Hanks



The Hanks Family in 1860

John A. Hanks, [48], doctor; Catherine, 31; Virginia, 20; Lucian, 18; John, 16; Catherine, 14; Louisa, 11; Laura, 10; Martin, 10; Walker, 5; Thomas A., 1

U. S. Census of 1860

Dr. John Hanks of Pittsboro

"Of Dr. John A. Hanks, as he was very prominent in Chatham county, I must speak more particularly. He was the youngest of three brothers, Martin, Wesley and himself who came from Orange county sometime I suppose about the year 1827. They lived and died in Pittsboro since the war. . . .

John A. Hanks was my classmate at Capt. Lameasurer's school. . . He attended medical lectures in Philadelphia and married his wife there, a Miss Morris and when she was taken from him by death, he afterwards married Miss Kate A. Walker. [Doct. Hanks lived in the house now owned and occupied by Mrs. Laura Hanks, Miss Kate Hanks, and Mr. Thos. Hanks.] Doct. Hanks was the leading physician in his day of Chatham county, was very popular, and had the confidence of all. He was an intelligent and eminently successful physician and generous and kind hearted to all."

J. J. Jackson, "Chatham Reminiscences,"
Chatham Record, 27 May 1897

The Hanks Family in Texas

Four of the seven children of Dr. John Armstrong Hanks and his first wife, Euphemia Morris Hanks, migrated from Pittsboro, North Carolina, to Brazoria County, Texas, in 1866. They joined their mother's brother, Dr. Anthony Morris, who had settled there in the 1850s.

The eldest, Virginia Morris Hanks, was already married to James P. Taylor of Pittsboro, a major in the Confederate army. They were well-known educators, establishing an early Texas school.

John Wesley Hanks, to whom these letters are addressed, was twice wounded in the Civil War and imprisoned in the Union camp at Johnson's Island. He never married but was a great favorite with family and friends and noted for his stories, especially those concerning his native North Carolina.

Louisa Amanda Hanks married Joseph Patterson Underwood, whose mother was one of Austin's first 300 colonists. The Underwood home on the banks of the Brazos River in Columbia is a Texas historic landmark and a museum.

William Martin Hanks, only sixteen when he came to Texas, never married. He was killed in a tragic altercation with a friend when he was thirty years old.

Virginia McGee

Pittsboro May 11th 1868

My Dear Son: I received your long looked for and truly welcome letter a few days since & would have replied earlier had not circumstances prevented. You must therefore look over my seeming indifference & rest assured that nothing affords me more pleasure than to correspond with my absent children. I am glad you have moved up country . . . it is bad enough in Chatham & all over The Old North State God knows. The Scallawags, Blatherskites, Rascals. . . have taken the day & NCarolina has elected Mr Holden Governor & all

the ticket composed as it is of Carpetbaggers & broken down politicians with a plenty of deserters from the parties they once were proud to belong to I mean the old Whig and Democratic parties. We hear this evening, however that the Congressional Committee has refused to take the state into the Union; the enfranchising clause is the objection & the probability is we shall be governed by a Military despotism, as at present, with the addition of another Brownlow of fiendish notoriety in the person of Bill Holden[.] Be it so! I would rather suffer on, and bide our time than have our old Constitution, made by our Fathers when men were honest & made by the wisest & best of N Carolina's gifted sons, & amended in [18]36 by such men as Gaston Toomer & Macon, thrown aside trampled on, & substituted in its stead a rickety, rascally, devilish, concern made in Washington & a literal copy in many respects of the Massachusetts Constitution with the negro equality clause & then just to think of the men who made it! Fifteen "nigger" & the balance neither wiser nor better men. Witness from our own County Chicken Billy Gunter & John McDonald!

I honestly think the policy persued by the Radical party will culminate in another war, a war in comparison with which the other war was but child's play. It will be a war of races & the deluded African will find that this is & shall be a white man's & only a white man's Government. The signs in the political horizon all through the North & Northwest are indeed encouraging & the Old Democratic party is girding up its loins for the coming conflict & when the victory shall have been won, woe be to the now-dominant party if it refuse to surrender the reins of Government!! A result however that I do most certainly anticipate, and this is why I think there will be another war. If it should come & I am able to shoulder a musket you may count me in "Sure."

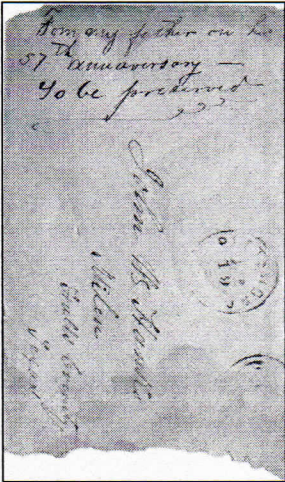
Enough of politics. Times are hard here. Money scarce & provisions high. There is no starvation, nor likely to be any, though in our own county nor adjoining ones that I have heard of. We have the best prospect for a wheat crop I have seen in many years. If no accident befall it there is no such crop been harvested in many years. Much depends however on the season from this time.

We had quite a lively time on the 6th celebrated as the 1st of May. The Coronation & the "tout ensemble" were most exquisite. All the young girls delivered their addresses in fine style & the band discoursed good music at proper intervals & all would have passed off charmingly had it not been for the fainting of one of the young ladies, Miss Euphemia Long, but she soon was better & able to go home & all proceeded in order subsequently. The health of the place is not very good just now[.] We are having an Epidemic, sore throat & Influenza with a sprinkle of Croup among children. . . . You ask about Lucien. He is here doing business with O. S. Poe. . . . He is well & I think doing pretty well. The rest of the family are well & all desire to be remem-

bered to you. . . . Your uncle Martin & Wesly are still alive & very well for old men[.] Both desire to be remembered kindly to you. . . .

You want me to go out to Texas. I should like to do so but at present I see no probability of it. The times are too hard & money is too scarce & property too low to bring any price and above all no chance to collect back debts! So I can't raise the means to take my family even a hundred miles from Pitts. Maybe something will turn up favorable . . . It is growing late & I must close this lazy & rather desultory epistle, with the request that you reply at your earliest convenience, & believe me as ever your affectionate old Father.

J.A. Hanks



Pittsboro April 19th 1869
My Dear Son:

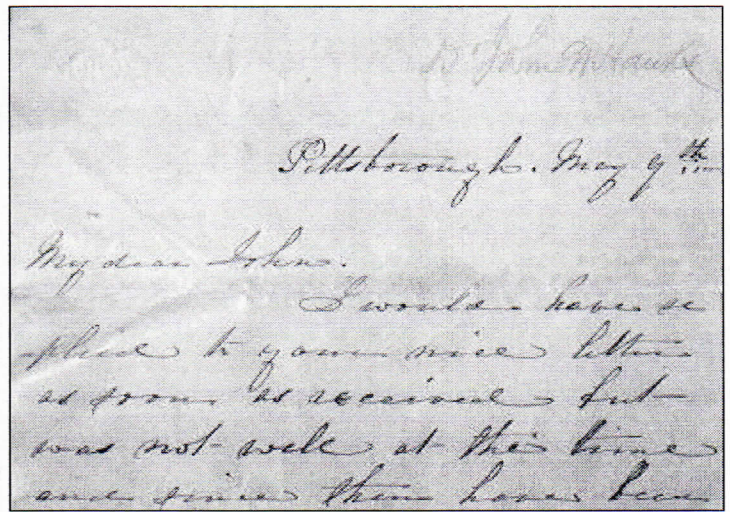
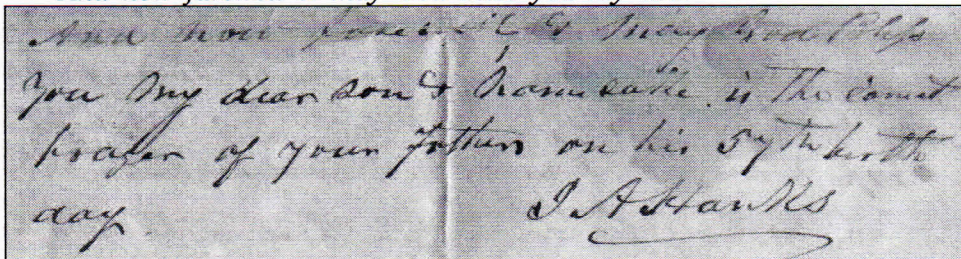
. . . this being my birthday, I have concluded to write all my absent children a letter, as this maybe my last birthday anniversary! Yes, John this is my 57th birthday. I am like an aged Hemlock, the winds of many winters have whistled through my branches & though I have stood the storms so far may soon fall in the midst of a calm in the stillness of the forest! The wear and

tear of an arduous profession faithfully followed and industriously practiced have at last after the period of 33 years begun to tell on a once robust constitution and I feel that my sands are well nigh run out and that at most I can promise myself but a few more years & then I shall be laid alongside of your sainted Mother in the old church yard to await the reunion of spirit & body at the last day. . . .

Capt. Denson delivered a splendid lecture on Astronomy the other night[,] a little too scientific for the crowd but exceedingly instructive to those who had any knowledge at all of the science.

. . . Old Teddy Berry enjoined me to give you his best respects & said he would pull off his coat & even his shoes for you at any time. The most of the people in this county that were formerly worth anything have taken the benefit of Bankruptcy & others the homestead so there is no collecting anything[.] I can't out of thousands due me raise enough to buy me a horse! What do you think of that & now an additional tax of \$20 for license to practice medicine!

And now farewell & may God Bless you my dear



Pittsborough. May 9th [1873]

My dear John.

I would have replied to your nice letters as soon as received but was not well at the time and since then have been very busy trying to get through with my pressing work which you may say is not much, but I have Lucian to sew for too since Kate left, and I do the most of my house work, and churn, and all such things which keep one pretty busy all the mornings.

. . . John, your Pa has given you to so many girls, that I do not know what you will do, just last evening Sarah Cowan, was here, and he promised you to her, and Miss Sue wrote me of the message you sent her. I hope she will be here this summer, there are to be a good many young people here; I expect it will be quite gay. . . .

John, we have spent the happiest and most comfortable winter than we have for long years, our family was small so we could have pretty much what we wished. . .

. . . It is late-good night. Your affectionate

Ma

Pittsboro Nov 1st 1873

My Dear John: I have received two letters from you since I have written you. I have been quite unwell for some time, & the Fair came off & all went away & left me & your Ma went to Opalika Alabama & things went wrong usually. I am still quite unwell & can but anticipate something serious out of this persistant Cattarrh. I am so glad there is no yellow Fever in Galveston it seems to rage still in Memphis & Shrevesport as well as some towns in the interior of Texas. We have now many cold weather & have had three heavy frosts, with ice. I hope the same has happened in the denoted

towns and that the plague may be stayed. You must write your Ma at Opalika Alabama in care of John L. Cowan Esqr. She has written us several letters, but has received none from home although we have written six. Capt. Denson's family will recover now I think. Claude

died & Thomie has been sick ninety days & forty of them never spoke a word. He is the most perfect skeleton you ever saw. . . .

Thank you for News, received again regularly. It is an excellent paper. Write when you can. God bless you.

Your Pa

Opelika. Dec 13th [1873]

My dear John.

Your kind, good, and affectionate letter, has just been handed me, and I must thank you again and again for the sentiment, affection, and length of it. I so delight in getting long letters, since if not for that I should never write, for I dislike it much. . . . I was made twice happy to day, the mornings mail brought me a letter from your Pa and Walker, and the evenings yours. Oh! John, I do get such dear sweet letters from your Pa, that it carries me back to "Auld lang syne." The one before the last had a most exquisite little bouquet in it. I said I would give one hundred dollars to see my dear Doctor but I then had not the money to return, and everyone here is so very poor, but it grieves sister Mary, so for me to speak of leaving, she says "I belonged to her before I ever saw the Dr. and I ought at least to stay all winter -". . . . Yet I wrote to your Pa, I would do just what he wished.

John, I wish very much you would get something to do at home if I get you a good situation will you accept it maybe in Raleigh or some where. Deliver me from these new countries I am more than ever disgusted and more pleased with little Pittsborough. . . .

Your affectionate
Mother

Pittsborough. Dec 21st [1874]

My Dear John.

I think you tell fibs in regards to my being in your debt, for I think I always reply to your letters, and in one of yours to Dr. recently you say "will reply to Ma's letter soon" and in your next and last you say "Beg Ma to answer my letter." but I have received none in the meantime- -

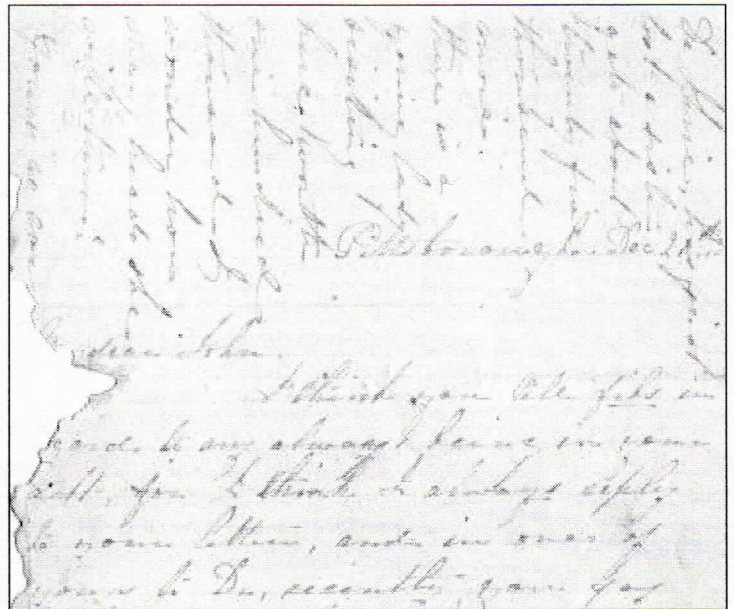
I am glad to find you are again in business, hope as you say, it will be permanent for that kind of business is so much better than hard work and may be no crop, and then if you are as fond of traveling as I am you must enjoy it. I wish you could be here this winter, there are to be six weddings. I don't know that any of them will be large but of course parties will follow, and

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then they have a dance every Friday night, you know the young folks will have fun in old Pitts. Eva Rencher is to be married, are you not surprised? but Dr. says it seems there is someone for everybody.

. . . It is perfectly astonishing how the Dr. has improved, he weighs more than he ever did, but once before in his life, and eats more than I ever saw him. You know he was always a small eater, but I do not think his mind is exactly right yet [torn] very much better, but all the time he was sick, he insisted on it that he was going to die, did not seem to like it if anyone said he would get well, and every time he came to the house if it was a dozen times a day, would go in the parlor to pray and then read his bible, but I am sorry to say that as soon as he got well, went to drinking but not so bad, does not get tight as often as he used to.

Well! well! next Friday will be Christmas, how time flies—this time last year I was in Tenn. This time I anticipate a very dull time. . . . The Dr. says it is impossible to collect any [money] . . . I have not had so much as \$5 since I returned.

Write soon and as often as you can. I hope you a "Merry Christmas". All send love.

Tommie is hard at work cutting wood to get money for Christmas and he is just like his Pa, will give it all away in presents but Dr. has changed in that respect. He has become real stingy. Lucien says he never saw anyone so changed in that way.

Dr. Ihrie has just lost a sister—gets about twenty five thousand more.

There is a young lady visiting here worth one hundred thousand. I wonder how many heads she will turn?

Yours as ever—Ma

[Editor's note: These lively letters have been very lightly edited and the graphics sized to fit the space available. The original letters may be viewed in the Chatham Historical Museum, Pittsboro, and perhaps at some time in the future in digital form.]