

Jones Grove ~ The Land and the People

*By Mike Zbailey, * March 2024*

The Historic Cemetery at Galloway Ridge

A few yards south of The Arbor section of the Galloway Ridge Retirement Community in north Chatham, inside an old stone wall, nine tombstones rise starkly above the barren ground. They tell the story of the Smith and Jones families, who lived on this land and whose legacy is an important part of American history up to this day. All the complexities and contradictions of the southern slave-owning society of the 19th century influenced the lives of the eight family members and one friend buried in the cemetery.



The Jones Grove Cemetery at Galloway Ridge

Francis Jones (1760-1844), the patriarch, was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and a major landowner. This land, called Jones Grove Plantation, was his crown jewel. The plantation house stood nearby on land now occupied by The Arbor. Jones once offered to donate part of his land for a college to be built at this location. He was turned down in favor of the small hamlet called Chapel Hill. Mary Parke Jones (1761-1811) was his wife and Ruffin Jones (1794-1836) was their unmarried son. Their daughter Delia Jones (1787-1852) is buried a few feet away next to her husband, James Strudwick Smith (1787-1852).

Strudwick Smith was the illegitimate son of William Francis Strudwick. The Strudwicks were a prominent family in Hillsborough and part of the upper class in this important town. The Smith family lived nearby but were poor and of a different social class. William Strudwick was seventeen years old when he fathered his son and did not marry the child's mother. Strudwick Smith later said, "Having been born poor, I have had to be the architect of my own future. I procured the means of advancement through my own labor." Aggressive and ambitious, Smith was unpopular among his colleagues because of his blatant self-promotion and brash style. After studying medicine briefly at the University of Pennsylvania and becoming a doctor in Hillsborough, Smith's ambitions took him far afield from medicine. He owned a general store, distilleries, a copper shop, and a substantial amount of land, some of which he inherited from his father-in-law, Francis Jones. He was active in the affairs of Hillsborough and was a member of the US Congress from 1817 to 1821. He became a Trustee of the University of North Carolina in 1821.

The Smiths had three children. The oldest, Mary Ruffin Smith (1814-1885), was raised as a refined, educated southern lady of the time. Mary's father purchased an enslaved fifteen-year-old girl named Harriet to be her personal servant. In the census records, Harriet is identified as mulatto, a designation used for men and women of mixed race. Later, Harriet married Reuben Day, a freedman, and they had a son, Julius. Since they were not permitted to live together as a family, Harriet lived in a cabin in Hillsborough. Maria Louisa

Spear (1804-1881), the only nonfamily member buried in the cemetery, was hired to tutor Mary, and they formed a friendship that lasted their entire lives.

The sons, Francis Jones “Frank” Smith (1816-1877) and James Sidney Smith (1819-1867), both attended the University of North Carolina. Frank also attended the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and, although he did not graduate, he became a doctor like his father. James Sidney, known by his middle name, was high-spirited and difficult and developed a serious drinking problem. In spite of his behavior and a reputation as a drunkard, he became a well-known politician and lawyer. In her family memoir, *Proud Shoes*, Pauli Murray, Sidney’s descendant, vividly describes Sidney’s stalking and sexual assault of Harriet. The next day, Frank, who had his own designs on Harriet, severely beat his brother and left him bleeding on the front lawn. Harriet became pregnant by Sidney, and in 1844 their daughter, Cornelia, was born. Frank then developed his own dominant relationship with Harriet, a liaison that produced three children—Emma, Annette, and Laura over the next eight years.



Oakland - Price Creek Plantation on Smith-Level Road

In the meantime, Strudwick Smith’s aggressive land speculations and other ill-fated business ventures finally caught up with him, and he became mired in debt. He astutely sheltered most of his assets within his family before declaring bankruptcy in 1845.

Even in the midst of the bankruptcy and its suits and counter suits, the Smiths, who all lived in Hillsborough, built a large house named Oakland at their property called Price Creek Plantation. The stately house still stands nearby behind a black iron fence on Smith Level Road.

The entire dysfunctional family—Strudwick Smith, now mentally and physically incapacitated due to the strain of the bankruptcy; Delia, his wife, worn out from the family misadventures; Frank, the lecherous and now part-time doctor who maintained his bitterness toward his brother; and the drunkard lawyer-politician, Sidney—lived in the house. Frank’s and Sidney’s sister, Mary, appalled by her brothers’ lifestyle, brought her four nieces, her brothers’ children, to live in the house and be raised and educated as family members. From this turmoil would come events that contributed to the post-Civil War survival of the University of North Carolina, and which would have a major impact on American history in modern times.

Beyond the Tombstones ~ The Legacies

Mary’s brother, Sidney, died in 1867 at the age of 48. Their brother, Frank, died in 1877 at the age of 61 and was buried in the Jones Grove Cemetery. Maria Spear, Mary’s former tutor and lifelong friend, moved into Oakland sometime before 1870. After Maria’s death in 1881, Mary confided to a friend, “I am alone in this world. I miss her too much.” The star-crossed Harriet, Mary’s enslaved servant and the mother of Mary’s nieces, was freed after the Civil War and lived in a cabin near Oakland. In 1872, while in her cabin, she was struck

by lightning and became paralyzed. Mary provided for her daily care until Harriet's death in 1873.

Mary's four nieces remained in the house with her. Mary provided for their education and raised them in the Episcopal church. The nieces were courted under Mary's watchful eye, and each eventually married. Cornelia, Sidney's daughter, and the oldest, married Robert Fitzgerald in 1869. Robert was a Civil War veteran from the Massachusetts Colored Regiment and was wounded at Petersburg. He had attended college and moved south to help educate freed slaves. He would become the grandfather of Pauli Murray, the most notable descendant of the family.

With her inheritance following Frank's death, Mary was now one of the wealthiest landowners in the area. Mary Ruffin Smith died quietly at Oakland on November 13, 1885, at the age of 71. A large procession of carriages escorted the hearse to the Jones Grove cemetery where she was buried. She was described in the newspaper as "a lady of uncommon strength of mind, lofty character and large charity."

Kemp Battle, the President of the struggling post-Civil War University of North Carolina and one of Mary's good friends, was named executor in her will. Mary willed about 1,400 acres of her property to the University of North Carolina for scholarships for the education of indigent students. The Smith scholarships allowed the university to increase its enrollment and broaden its student body. Mary Ruffin Smith is honored by the University with a plaque inside Memorial Hall. Mary gave her nieces – Emma, Annette, and Laura – 100 acres each from the Jones Grove Plantation land. From the Price Creek Plantation, Mary gave Cornelia 100 acres and willed the rest to the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina.

The story continues. Cornelia's husband, Robert Fitzgerald, taught school, farmed, and had a small brick-making operation. He began to slowly go blind because of a war injury, but even with his failing eyesight he built a small house at 906 Carroll Street in Durham where it still stands.



Pauli Murray's childhood home in Durham.

Agnes, one of the Fitzgerald children, became a nurse and moved to Baltimore where she married William Murray, a teacher. Their youngest child, Anna Pauline, whom they called Pauli, was born in 1910. Following the death of Pauli's parents when she was three, she went to live with her grandparents, Cornelia and Robert Fitzgerald, in Durham. Pauli graduated from Hillside High School in Durham and attended Hunter College in New York, graduating in 1933. She worked as a teacher and social worker and met Eleanor Roosevelt when Mrs. Roosevelt was visiting a CCC women's working camp in upstate New York where Pauli was employed. They would form a long-lasting friendship.

Then came three events that would change the trajectory of Pauli's life. In 1938, she applied to the law school of the University of North Carolina. She was refused admission because of her race. The second incident was in 1940 when Pauli and a friend took a bus from New York to Durham to visit her family. They were arrested in Petersburg, Virginia for sitting in the front of the bus and refusing to go to the back. She would not pay the fine and spent several days in jail before being released. In 1941, Pauli entered Howard University's Law School where she was the only woman. She was class President and

graduated first in the class. Then came the third life changing event. Traditionally Harvard Law School offered a fellowship for further study to the top student at Howard. Pauli applied but was rejected because of her gender. Later she earned a Doctorate from Yale Law School.

Pauli became a civil rights lawyer and activist for women's rights. Her writings were used as part of the basis for the landmark school desegregation case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Pauli was not shy about advocating for important issues and wrote a critical letter to her friend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., asking why there were no women in leadership positions for the March on Washington in 1963. In 1971, future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg named Murray an honorary co-author in her brief successfully overturning a gender discrimination case before the US Supreme Court.

Pauli's list of accomplishments continued: she was a co-founder of NOW (National Organization for Women), was named Woman of the Year by *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1947, served on President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, and published the highly acclaimed biography of her grandparents, *Proud Shoes*.

Capping her career, Pauli became the first black woman in the US to become a priest in the Episcopal Church, the church of Mary Ruffin Smith. Her first service was in the small Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill where her grandmother, Cornelia, was baptized. Pauli Murray was named a Saint in the Episcopal Church in 2012. The Bishop said of her, "Pauli Murray had an agenda for human good that was constant and unswerving."

Pauli Murray died on July 1, 1985, and is buried in the Cypress Hills Cemetery in New York. Her girlhood home on Carroll Street in Durham is being restored and will house the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice. Pauli was honored on her one hundredth birthday in 2010 by both Duke and UNC. In 2016, Yale University named a residential college for her.

The Jones Grove land passed through several owners until it was purchased by R.B. Fitch who developed Fearrington Village. Pauli Murray's legacy lives on in the laws of the land as well as the lives she has influenced. Jones Grove cemetery, still owned by the University of North Carolina, holds an impressive monument at Mary Smith's grave and eight additional graves, including Mary's grandparents, uncle, parents, and brothers. Maria Spear, Mary's friend, is the only non-family member buried in the cemetery. The nine people lying in this small cemetery have a checkered history, but they leave an important legacy that affects us to this day.

"True emancipation lies in the acceptance of the past...in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors." Pauli Murray

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Chatham County Historical Association volunteer, Sy Robbins, has traced Francis Jones' acquisition of the Jones Grove land, as well as the disposition of the properties left to UNC and to Mary Ruffin Smith's nieces. You can see his [Jones Grove Deed History here](#).