

The Burns Family

The Burns family first appeared in Augusta County on the 1807 Personal Property Tax List. Nancy Burns, matriarch of the family, was born around 1767 in Virginia. She was labeled a “free colored person” by the census taker. There were four others in her household. By 1820, she had ten people in her household plus a female slave that was over 45. Her spouse, Joseph Burns, never appeared as head of the household in either census. The slave woman may have been a relative.

On November 25, 1813, an Isaac Burns and John Burns registered as Free Negroes. John was a shoemaker by trade. On November 24, 1823, Nancy registered at the courthouse as a Free Negro. She was described as five foot two inches tall with a yellow complexion. She said she was fifty-seven years old. Along with her were her daughter, Peggy and her sons George and Harvey.

The Burns family was unusual in that they were extremely light-skinned. Harvey and Isaac Burns soon headed north to West Virginia where they passed as whites and lost their designation as mulattoes. George Burns and brother Joseph remained behind until the 1860's. With the Civil War looming, George packed up and moved to Harrison County, West Virginia. In a short time, they too lost their Free Black status and called themselves white. Two of George's sons, William and John, joined the Colored Troops and fought for the Union. One son is described as having blue eyes.

The Burns family continued in Augusta County in Joseph Burns' line. Also, two daughters of George Burns remained behind, having married into the Strother family.