

Martha Susan Johnson Burns

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The great joy of adventuring into genealogy is learning about ancestors that I never had the opportunity to know personally. Martha Susan Johnson Burns was my Great Grandmother and I have learned much about her life which allows me to feel her presence in my life.

Martha Susan Johnson was born in LaGrange, Georgia on February 2, 1844. She was the daughter of Benjamin J. Johnson and Ann Eliza Tysor of Chatham County. She had one sibling, a sister named Mary Frances Johnson (McDonald) who was born January 31, 1842 in Chatham County. I have been unable to learn anything about the fact that Benjamin and Ann Eliza were in Georgia for a time but sometime after Martha Susan's birth the family returned to Chatham County.

Martha Susan's mother, Ann Eliza Tysor, was the daughter of Jordan Tysor (1797-1875) and Lucy Anne Poe (1799-1852) of Chatham County.

Martha Susan Johnson married Robert Marsh "Bob" Burns on February 19, 1866. Robert had served four years with the Army of the Confederacy. On December 25, 1919, The Chatham Record printed a tribute to Robert M. Burns written by his son Robert H. Burns containing the following:



Martha Susan Johnson Burns



Robert Marsh Burns

However, those days could not always last. The dark days of '61 and '65 came, those days which tried mens' souls. . . . During these years there was a little girl who lived not so many miles from his old home. She, too, was faithful to all the duties of home, and while this young man was enduring the hardships of war, she was at home making blankets and other useful articles to make as comfortable as possible the life of the soldier. She was a soldier of the Cross as well as a ministering angel. . . . The war ended and the youth came home. In due course of time he wedded the Bear Creek maiden.

Martha Susan and Robert Marsh Burns had four children: Emma Burns (1866-1940); Augustus Merrimon Burns (1873-1947); Robert Henry Burns, Sr. (1878-1957); Annie Thompson Burns (1883-1973).

The September 24, 1896 Chatham Record carried the following announcement: "Mrs. R.M. Burns has reopened the well known 'Cross Hotel' at this place, and will be pleased to receive the public patronage. Good fare at reasonable prices, and polite attention to all guests." In later years we find the hotel identified as the Burns Hotel. The Cross/Burns Hotel was previously the home of Green Womack. It was located directly across the street from the Pittsboro Presbyterian Church.

On December 6, 1906 John McMurray published an article in the "Jeffersonian Democrat" about a trip taken by a group of hunters from Philadelphia and Baltimore by train down to Chatham County to spend some time hunting. The group was to spend their time in Pittsboro in the Burns Hotel. McMurray reported that as the train neared Pittsboro, his wife called him to meet a lady that she had been talking with. McMurray describes the woman as "a handsome lady, Mrs. Norris, daughter of the lady with whom we were expecting to make our home for the winter." McMurray continues: "So here we are in Pittsboro, comfortable, and with plenty to eat. The house we are in is a hundred years old, and the town is older still. . . . We are comfortably located in Pittsboro, with Mrs. Burns. We have a fine large room to live and sleep in, and a wood fire to sit by. Besides several regular boarders there are comers and goers daily. The Burns Hotel enjoys the reputation of setting a good table."

The Chatham Record reports many events happening at the Burns Hotel in the early 1900s. There are reports of visitors (some staying as long as two months); hunting parties; weddings; and temporary lodgings for visiting dentists, veterinarians, and piano tuners. The newspaper reported in 1905 that the hotel had been improved by a coat of paint, and in 1915, that chairs had been stolen from the piazza (porch) in a bold robbery. In 1922 the paper posted "One of the prettiest gardens in town is the one owned and cultivated by Mrs. R.M. Burns. It almost makes your mouth water to look at it."

The Chatham Record of October 20, 1922 carried an article about the birthday celebration of Robert M. Burns in which Martha Susan's cooking skills are referenced: "Yesterday, October 19th, Mr. Robert M. Burns, of Pittsboro celebrated his 87th birthday at his home on court house square. He was blessed with a bountiful supply of 'possum and taters, and the editor regrets that he was unable to accept an invitation to help him eat the feast."

Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Burns were a fixture of Pittsboro known far and wide from the many guests they hosted over the years. The 26 Jun 1926 issue of the Chatham Record published a photo taken by a visitor and sent to the Burns's from El Paso, Texas, with well wishes from a former guest. The headline is "One of Chatham's Most Loved and Widely Known Old Couple." In the photo my great grandmother is pictured reading the Chatham Record to her husband.



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Martha Burns on horseback with Pittsboro Presbyterian Church in the background.

One thing that I know about my great grandmother was that she preferred to travel by horseback. Her husband preferred the comfort of riding in his buggy. The hat she is wearing in this photo of her on horseback remains in our family to this day – it has ostrich feathers circled around its brim.

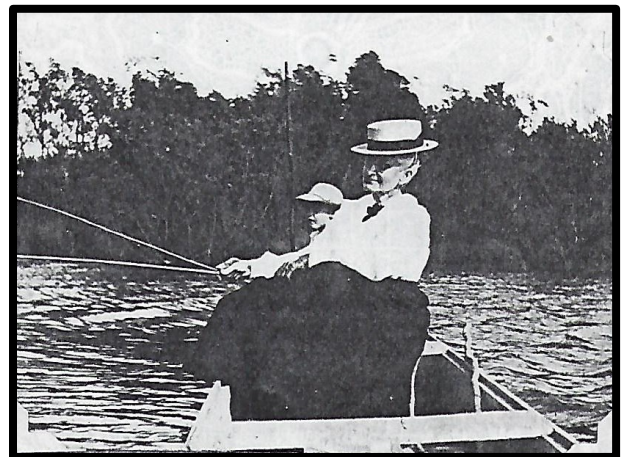
On July 18, 1926, Robert Marsh Burns died. He had served Chatham County as Justice of the Peace for 45 years and he had served Pittsboro as its Mayor.

I have a Chatham Record article dated November 4, 1926 captioned “Mrs. Burns Goes Fishing.” Apparently, my great grandmother was an avid fisherwoman! At the time of this trip, she was 83 years old. She had traveled to Whiteville, North Carolina to the home of her son Robert H. Burns. The article states that she was “delighted with her visit, and particularly at the opportunity given her to enjoy the sport of fishing, and fishing in larger waters than those of her native Chatham.”

The article describes in detail her travel with her oldest daughter Emma Burns Norris from Pittsboro to Whiteville. Her first fishing party included her son Robert and his two young sons and a trip to Lake Waccamaw. They traveled back home with their catch in time for a fish supper.

Their next adventure took them to Little River to fish and then over to the beach. It was Martha’s first visit to the ocean, where she gathered shells and enjoyed the beauty of the ocean and all of its creatures.

Following the fishing excursions, Emma and Robert took her to Chadbourn and then to Wilmington” where she had spent much of the time of the Civil War with relatives, making clothes for the army. This was her first visit since those critical days.



Martha Susan and grandson fishing at Lake Waccamaw.

The last photograph taken of Martha Susan Burns was in December of 1930. The picture was taken in Raleigh at Norburn Terrace, the home of her daughter Emma Burns Norris, wife of Mr. Herbert E. Norris. Pictured with Martha Susan is her daughter Emma and her son Augustus Merrimon Burns.



Martha Susan Burns, right, with daughter Emma and son Augustus Merrimon Burns.

Martha Susan Johnson Burns died on January 17, 1931. Her death certificate indicates that she had suffered from

bronchopneumonia for about a week. She died at the home of her son Augustus Merrimon Burns in Roxboro. Her funeral was at the Baptist Church in Pittsboro. She is buried in the church cemetery beside her husband. Her obituary reads in part as follows: "Had Mrs. Burns lived until February she would have been 87 years old, though appearing to be a much younger woman. She was unusually active for her advanced years and alert in both mind and body, vitally interested in all current topics of the day, and accepted the changes that has come with the passing years in a most graceful and philosophical manner . . . she was until the last few years, an active worker in the church."