

Roxie Small: Chatham Civil Rights Activist

Joanne Small James, Feb 2021

We asked Joanne Small James to share her memories of her grandmother, Roxie Dark Small. Roxie was active in many civil rights organizations, always seeking to improve conditions for black Chathamites. Joanne provides part of her story.



Roxie Small, 1926, Hickory Mountain.

My grandmother, Roxie Anna Dark, was born on September 29, 1899, in Pittsboro, North Carolina. Her parents were Eliza (Elizabeth) Shane Dark and Johnnie Alston. She was the oldest child, born when her mother was 24 and her father was 22. Her brothers were Avin Dark and George Dark. Her sister was Lessie Wilma Dark Alston. My great-grandmother Shane moved to Durham to be a caregiver for her father, Frank Dark, when Roxie was around 10-12 years old. Roxie raised her brothers and sister. Growing up, Roxie and her siblings lived near 15-501 near Belmont Church.

Roxie married John Erie Small on September 17, 1917, in her hometown. They had nine children in 20 years. Roxie eventually raised 4 grandchildren, Paul, Joanne (that's me), Sandra and Randy.

I came to live in Pittsboro in 1946. My grandparents lived on Highway 87, in a two-story house. The house was said to have belonged to a confederate soldier in the past. The house was about a quarter mile from 87. The road to the house was all red clay, so when it rained, cars could not travel to the house. We had to walk. The house was surrounded by apple and peach trees, and we had trees of nuts. We also had strawberries, muscadines, blackberries in the woods. My grandfather raised hunting dogs (beagles), sows, and cows. We had a white mule used for farming. We had a large vegetable garden 1-2 miles away from the house. Each year my grandfather would slaughter the sows and cows for each adult child that live away from home. All of the adult children would come home often. My grandmother, Roxie, canned, made jellies and jams, and baked bread twice a day.

My Grandmother shared with me stories of her grandparents' slavery experiences. Every night she taught us Black history, family history, Aesop's fables, poetry, etc. Roxie taught us to always look people in their eyes when you spoke to them, and not to ever bow our heads or be afraid to speak.

Education was very important to her. She never had a chance to go to school. In order to get an education in the 1920s and 1930s, Black children in central and eastern Chatham County attended small, one-room church schools that were scattered throughout the county. The Small family children attended Hamlets Chapel during those days. Mitchell Chapel received Rosenwald funds at the time. In 1934, Horton High School was opened. The first graduating class was 1935. Roxie Small was the first Horton PTA President and remained in that position for 24 years. I have copies of my father's and aunts and uncles report cards from Hamlet school.

Roxie worked as a "washerwoman" for many of the white families. She spoke of the London family often. They gave her books and she turned to others to teach her to read and write. She and other Black leaders in Pittsboro pushed for Horton High. They pushed for school buses. Children walked from all over to attend Horton. Roxie ran for the County Board of Education in 1962. I don't think there had ever before been a black candidate. She was not elected.



Roxie Small home on 87, 1949. Shown are daughter-in-law, America; Roxie; and Joanne Small (James).

In later years, Roxie maintained a home for the aged in Pittsboro. She had between 8-10 residents at a time. Each morning, she bathed and dressed them and served breakfast. These people had various illnesses and/or special needs. Some of them couldn't walk, talk, or feed themselves.

Roxie was wife, mother, grandmother, minister, (Russell Chapel and Mitchell Chapel churches), PTA Horton High President (23 years), one of the founders of the NAACP in Chatham, NAACP Mother of the Year 1956, co-founder of the Home Demonstration Club, and Co-founder of the Negro County Fair. Her home was a stop for the Chatham County Bookmobile for many years.

Civil rights were Roxie's mission. My cousin Paul and I attended many meetings with her. Sometimes those meetings were held in the woods at night. NAACP leaders from the North would come down in the cloak of darkness. Only a handful of people were interested. People were afraid.

Roxie was among the leaders who established the Chatham Community Branch #5377 of the NAACP. The first formal meeting was held at Belmont AME Zion Church in Pittsboro. Roxie was chosen as the first branch president, and she led the group to identify the most critical racial barriers in the county. First, they decided to address registration and voting. Later, they tackled other issues such as segregated schools, accommodations and discriminatory housing and banking practices. I can remember when Roxie was chosen NAACP Mother of the Year, 1954-55.



*Leaders involved in establishing the Home Demonstration Club.
Roxie Small - second from left in first row.*

me. I have always tried to live my life so that Roxie would be proud of me. I returned to college at 68 years old and earned my B.S and MBA by 71 years old. When I crossed that stage, I knew Roxie was crossing with me. I attended demonstrations with her in Raleigh, Durham, with the NAACP. I grew up under the NAACP, but as a young adult in the 60s I joined SNCC then the Black Panther Party with my husband. I marched against the Vietnam War, lynchings, and unfair housing. I took my son Eric with me, to teach him.

Note: Small isn't really our original name. My grandfather Erie was born a Brooks. When his mother passed all of the children were separated and given away to different families—some as far way as South Carolina. My grandfather lived with the Small family and adopted that name. My grandmother, Roxie, was born a Dark. Elizabeth Shane Dark was her mother. Her father was Johnnie Alston.

Roxie died on March 9, 1965, at the age of 64, and was buried in Mitchell's Chapel AME Church cemetery, in Pittsboro.

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From the 10 May 1962 Chatham Record.

Roxie and Erie never went to school. They worked hard all of their lives. Now, the Small legacy includes PhDs, several Masters, and Bachelor degrees. I look at them and I am amazed. Three of Roxie's sons served in WWII—Eugene (Leyte, Philippines), Nathaniel Dark (Northern Africa- First ever anti-aircraft all Black unit), George Small (Black photographer, Europe). Charlie Small served in Korea and Allen T. Small served in peace time. I am so proud of my family.

When the March on Washington was being planned, I was 16. Roxie called my father and told him to make sure I was there participating. I was!!!! She was so proud of



*Roxie visiting DC to attend the
1961 inauguration of JFK.*



Erie and Roxie Small



Belmont AME Zion Church, Pittsboro

Roxie Dark Small Obituary
from the 10 Mar 1965, *Burlington Daily News*

Mrs. Roxie D. Small Final rites for Rev. Mrs. Roxie D. Small, 66, of Rt. 3 Pittsboro, NC, will be held tomorrow at Mitchell's chapel ME Zion Church. Mrs. Small had a number of relatives in Alamance and Chatham counties. She was a member of the Usher Board Union. She died Sunday morning at 2:45 in a Durham hospital following eight days of critical illness. She was a native of Chatham County. She was the daughter of Eliza Shane Dark and Johnnie Alston. She operated a rest home for the infirm aged for many years. She was the wife of John Erie Small and a member of Mitchell Chapel AME Zion church. Her first church home was Russell Chapel AME Zion Church.

Surviving are a daughter, Celeste Small Bazemore of Phila. PA; six sons: Nathaniel Dark (Maggie) of Durham, George Small (Bellina) of Phila. PA, Charlie Small (Irene) of Phila. PA, Eugene Small (America) of DC, Allen Small (Ella Mae) of Concord, NC, David Small (Annie Lois) of Pittsboro, NC; a stepson, Roy Brooks; five sisters: Lessie Dark Alston, Carrie Alston, Arthelia Alston, Maude Andrews, Geneva Alston; three brothers: George Dark, Henry Alston, Colesta Alston; and 12 grandchildren. The funeral services will be conducted by the Rev. R. V. Horton, pastor of Mitchell Chapel, and burial in the church cemetery

Joanne Small James is Roxie Small's granddaughter. She moved from Fort Washington, MD to Concord NC in 2006. Joanne retired from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, Pentagon, with 39 years of federal service. Before that, she was employed at OSD/DoD, and worked for the Civil Rights Division, Dept. of Justice. She was married to Milton James for 39 years. They had two children, Toyia and Eric. Joanne has four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.