

Azariah Graves (1776 – 1837)

Azariah Graves was born 1 November 1776, and died 1 May 1837. He is buried in the Graves family cemetery on East Main Street in Yanceyville, North Carolina (Highway 62 east near the junction with Highway 86). The cemetery is on land he once owned and near a house that he built around 1799.

His tombstone (photograph right) provides the following epitaph:

“An honest man, the noblest work of God.”



It was not left to chance that he was buried at the present site. In his will he selected “a grass lot near the stables and his grave was to be walled with rock.” According to Yanceyville historian, Mary Frances Kerr Donaldson, “[t]his clearly indicates that he was the first to be buried in what is now the old Graves cemetery.”



As can be seen from the photograph to the left, his wishes were carried out with respect to the grass lot and the stone wall. His broken head stone can be seen leaning against the far wall.

In his will he also asked for his brother Elijah Graves to be buried beside him and requested that his brothers and sisters would use the same cemetery. To a large extent, his wishes were honored.

Nor did Azariah Graves object to his slaves sharing the cemetery. His final request was to have his funeral sermon in his home with “all servants to attend and to sit or stand near enough to hear.” A Baptist minister and cousin of Azariah Graves, Reverend Kerr, preached the funeral as requested. The will was proved at the July 1837 session of the court in Yanceyville.

His sisters, Delilah Miles and Polly Mebane, and his brothers, Elijah, William, and Barzillai Graves are buried with Azariah Graves in this beautiful plot. Also buried there are in-laws and various cousins. Here is a partial inventory of the cemetery:

1. Captain William Graves (brother)
2. Ann L. Graves (wife of Captain William Graves)
3. Mrs. Polly Mebane (sister)
4. General Barzillai Graves (brother)
5. Mary T. Graves (wife of General Barzillai Graves)
6. Azariah Graves, Esquire
7. Elijah Graves, Sr. (brother)
8. Mrs. Elizabeth Graves (wife of James L. Graves)
9. Delilah Miles (sister)
10. Abner Miles (husband of Delilah Miles)
11. Elizabeth Graves Burke (preparations only)
12. Charles Bidwell Farrar (husband of Elizabeth Graves Burke)

Mentioned but Not Interred: James L. Graves (husband of Elizabeth Graves)

Azariah Graves already owned substantial Caswell County real estate as a result of gifts from his father. However, in 1821 Azariah purchased additional land from his Uncle Solomon Graves, who had moved to Georgia. This included the land upon which Azariah built his home and upon which he is buried. Azariah Graves willed his home place to his brother Elijah Graves.

Azariah Graves was a son of John Herndon Graves and Ann (Nancy) Talbot Slade, who had ten children. Those children are as follows, including Azariah Graves.

1. Elizabeth (Betsy) Graves m. Thomas Kimbrough
2. Catherine (Katie) Graves m. Groves Howard
3. Thomas Graves m. Mary Lee Bennett
4. Azariah Graves
5. Elijah Graves
6. Captain William Graves m. (1) Isabella Graves, (2) Anne Lea
7. Barzillai Graves m. (1) Frances Williams, (2) Mary Thomas (Marshall) Royal
8. Delilah Graves m. (1) David Womack, (2) Abner Miles
9. Ann (Nancy) Graves m. Bartlett Yancey, Jr.
10. Polly Graves m. James Mebane

Thus, it appears that at least six of the children of John Herndon Graves and Ann (Nancy) Talbot Slade are buried in the Azariah Graves cemetery in Yanceyville: Azariah, Elijah, William, Barzillai, Delilah, and Polly. Unclear is whether the Elizabeth Graves buried there also is a sibling. Note that Ann (Nancy) Graves (who married Bartlett Yancey, Jr.) is buried at the Bartlett Yancey, Jr. house on Highway 158 in the western portion of Yanceyville. This accounts for seven (possibly eight) of the children of John Herndon Graves and Ann (Nancy) Talbot Slade.

Note the following from *The Heritage of Caswell County North Carolina*, Jeannine D. Whitlow, Editor (1985) (Article on Azariah Graves by Mary Frances Kerr Donaldson):

In 1811 his father gave him a tract of land in the town which ran west of the public square up to the main road (later known as Main Street), through to his brother's land known in the 1839 plat as Greensboro Street. Azariah erected a brick office on his property near the public square. In 1795 an Azariah Graves was Sheriff of Caswell County. (This however may have been an uncle by the same name.) Also Caswell was represented in the N.C. Senate from 1806-1811 by Azariah Graves. He was county trustee from 1829 until his death.

In addition to the above land, Azariah also owned a large plantation near Caswell Court House to the east running back to Country Line Creek. He was the owner of a tanyard in the town. In 1826 his father willed him five acres "around the tanyard."

For \$225 Azariah deeded to Ibzan Rice in 1832 a parcel of land lying at or near Caswell Court House running up the main street. Rice was a tavern keeper and erected a tavern on the site. It is the same property sold in 1874 to John H. Kerr as the latter deed records the fact. Also Azariah sold a

smaller lot east of the above to Ansel and Thomas Ware. The same lot was sold in 1838 to James Gunn and William Bowe for \$1050. (Gunn and Bowe listed their trade in the census as tanner and currier).

The brick office of Azariah Graves stood to the east of the Kerr brick office. He was a bachelor and evidently a



practicing attorney as his estate sale included many law books. A detailed and exacting will reveals much of the man. He owned lots in Milton as well as in Yanceyville. Those in Yanceyville were divided among his brothers and sisters as was his farm land. His estate sale lists a vast

amount of personal property. A touching request was that his slaves were to go to his brothers and sisters and each slave could pick its master.

Following is a description of the Azariah Graves house from *An Inventory of Historic Architecture Caswell County North Carolina*, Ruth Little-Stokes (1979) at 21:

Since less than a dozen structures believed to have been built before 1800 were found during the inventory, 18th century architecture in Caswell County is difficult to characterize. All that survive are of



Fig. 17. Azariah Graves House. Handsome three-part Georgian-style house built by one of Yanceyville's patriarchs.

frame or log construction, and range from the tiny Hemphill Log House to the substantial, dignified "mansion houses" of Azariah Graves, Yanceyville . . . and Jethro Brown (Brown-Graves-Yarbrough House), Locust Hill. . . . These Georgian style houses are among the most imposing houses in the county, and contain well-preserved Georgian interior finish of simple, handsome design. The Azariah Graves House (Fig. 17), believed to date ca. 1780, is a well-executed three-part house, with a two-story center block and flanking one-story wings. It is enriched by a classical modillion cornice. The interior features a transverse hall with an enclosed winding stair and a single room on each level of the center block and a single room in each wing. The interior fireplace treatment . . . consists of simple molded wood surrounds and paneled chimney breasts

Ancestors of Azariah Graves substantially restored the house during 1969-1985, addressing years of neglect. To the right is a recent (2005) photograph of the house.



Azariah Graves Name Confusion

Many early families used the same given name repeatedly through the generations. The Graves family was no exception. Many have confused the various Azariah Graves. A short primer on this name follows (restricted to Caswell County):

The first Azariah Graves in Caswell County was the son of John Graves and Isabella Lea. This Azariah lived 1768-1850 and was an uncle of the Azariah Graves who is the subject of this historical sketch.

The second Azariah Graves (1776-1837) is the subject of this historical sketch.

The third Azariah Graves was Azariah Graves, Jr. (1815-1896), the son of the first Azariah Graves (1768-1850) and the first cousin of the subject Azariah Graves (1776-1837).

In 1792, an Azariah Graves was a Caswell County justice of the peace and participated in the decision to construct a county courthouse. Which of the two Azariah Graves living at the time was this, the uncle or the nephew?

According to William Powell's history of Caswell County:

Caswell Court House had developed by the early 1830s to the point that it was beginning to have a character of its own and was no longer merely a seat of government in the middle of the forest. The old courthouse was no longer adequate and it was decided to build a new one. In April, 1831, Azariah Graves, Elijah Graves, and Paul A Haralson for the modest sum of \$1.00 each gave land adjoining the courthouse square "in trust for the good people of Caswell County."

But which Azariah Graves sold property for \$1.00 to provide land for a new courthouse? All three of the Azariah Graves men described above were alive in 1831. However, it is unlikely that it was Azariah Graves, Jr. (1815-1896) as he would have been only around sixteen years old at the time.

William Powell also provides the following at 424-425:

Many such landscaped settings may still be seen in the count. Others which have disappeared are remembered, however. The *Milton News* of June 8, 1916, commented on particularly interesting site on "Gentleman's Ridge" in the western part of the county near Ashland. A mammoth oak tree, 35 feet around at the ground, marked the site of the ante-bellum home of Azariah Graves. Graves was said to have "displayed his love of the beautiful by laying off the grounds symmetrically and beautifying them by planting lovely flowers and ornamental shrubs everywhere around them." In his work Graves created a number of especially attractive settings. One

of the most striking and best remembered things that he did, however, was to plant boxwoods in the shape of a perfect heart. “Squarely across this big heart Mr. Graves spelled his name ‘AZARIAH GRAVES’ in large letters in evergreen boxwoods, and directly at the apex of this big heart was the open door of Mr. Graves’ palatial and hospitable home.” The house burned about 1899 but some of the boxwoods are still living.

Which Azariah Graves created this large boxwood heart?

In 1840, an Azariah Graves was one of the original trustees of Trinity Baptist Church in southwestern Caswell County near the Rockingham County line. This could not have been the subject Azariah Graves because he died in 1837. Was it his uncle or his first cousin?

Richmond Stanfield Frederick, Jr.
October 15, 2005

