

# *Soldier, Preacher, Educator*

## Meet John Chavis, The First College-Educated African American

BY LISA PERRY

Last October, Washington and Lee University voted to remove the name of slave owner John Robinson from that campus building, and rededicate it in memory of John Chavis, the first African American to receive a college degree in the U.S. who went on to become a licensed

Presbyterian preacher and an educator.

Before Chavis moved more recently into the W&L spotlight, he had remained mostly hidden in fuzzy shadows of historical corridors.

For most area residents, if they had heard of him at all, they had gleaned their information from a state historical marker about him

erected on Washington Street just over a decade ago.

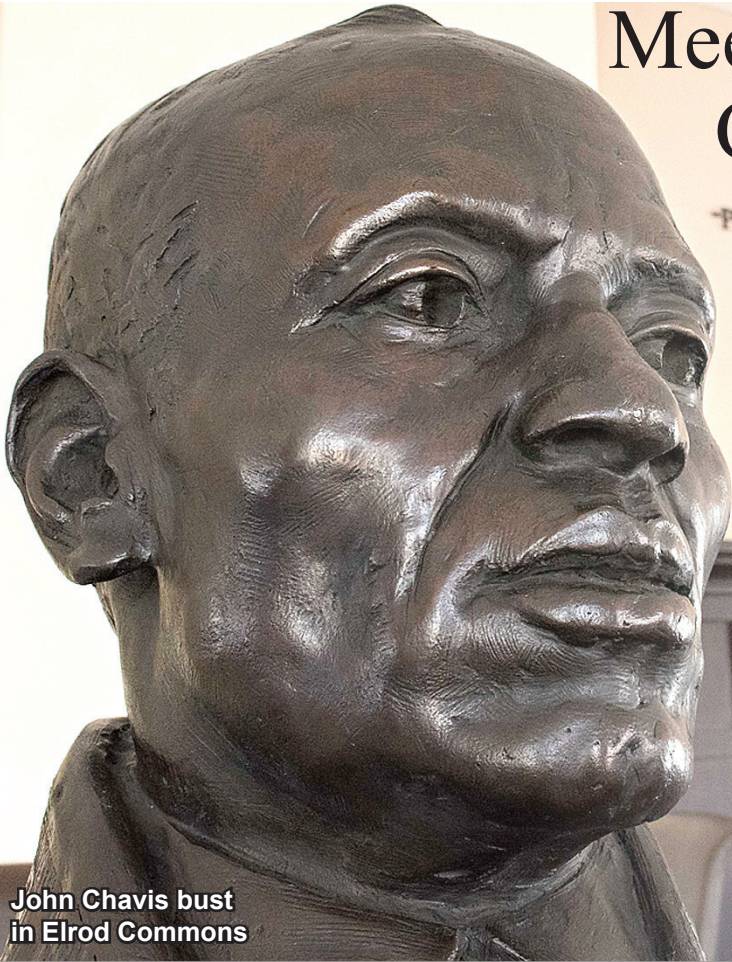
But who exactly who was this John Chavis? Where did he come from? How did he end up in Lexington? What was the fate of an educated black man in the antebellum south?

*See Chavis, page 8*

### **Chavis Hall Dedication Saturday**

Washington and Lee University will dedicate Chavis Hall, formerly Robinson Hall, this Saturday, March 9, at 1:30 p.m. in front of the building on the colonnade.

For a history of the building, see page A9.



John Chavis bust  
in Elrod Commons

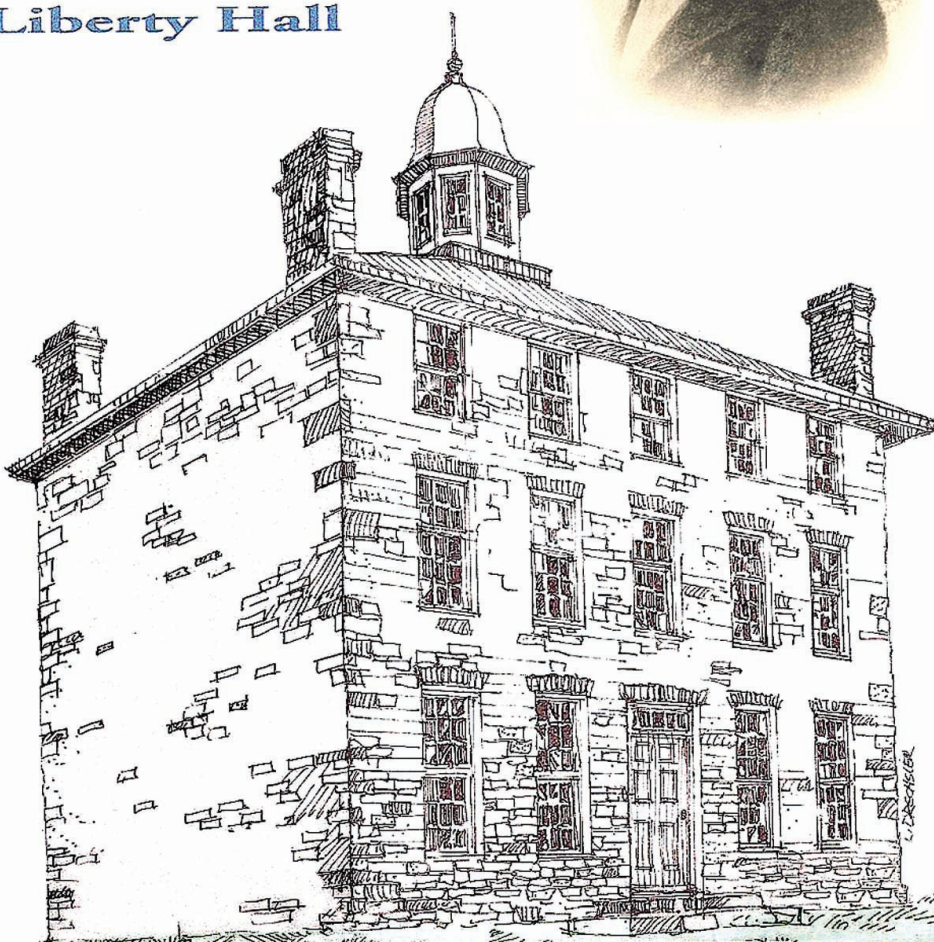


WILLIAM GRAHAM (at right) was the first president of Liberty Hall Academy (an artist's rendering of which appears below) on Mulberry Hill in Lexington. He was the president of the school when John Chavis attended in the 1790s. (images courtesy of W&L Special Collections.)



AT LEFT, a state historical marker on John Chavis was erected on Washington Street near Evans Hall in 2006. BELOW, early W&L benefactor John Robinson is buried beneath this obelisk to the southeast of the building that bore his name from 1936 until last year. (Lisa Perry photos)

## Liberty Hall



## Chavis

The News-Gazette researched Chavis over the past several months, locating articles and a short biography about him, talking with the biographer and college officials, and going to a large number of primary sources, such as census records, tax lists, Revolutionary War muster rolls, college meeting minutes, and Presbyterian Church records.

The full summary of that research can be found online at [www.thenews-gazette.com](http://www.thenews-gazette.com), but what follows here and in a second installment next week is a more concise summary.

### Youth, Revolutionary War, And The 1780s

John Chavis was a brave, erudite, and outspoken man of dignity in a time when being a free man of mixed race with such qualities frequently proved lethal.

Historians debate Chavis' ancestry, race, political beliefs, place of birth and death, and education. Most say his parents were Jacob and Elizabeth Chavis of North Carolina; some claim William and Lottie Chavis of Virginia. Where he grew up is unknown, but his free status was never seriously questioned.

Chavis enlisted as a teenager in a Virginia army regiment in 1778, fighting in the southern theater of the Revolutionary War for about three years. After the war, he surfaced in Mecklenburg County, Va., with one horse and the clothes on his back.

Looking for work, Chavis canvassed multiple counties along the Virginia-North Carolina border, avoiding exorbitant "bonds," fees designed to hinder free blacks' easy movement. Each time the veteran traveled, he returned to his home state within a certain time and before curfew to avoid the possibility of capture and being forced into indentured servitude. In some North Carolina counties, Chavis would have been required to wear a shoulder patch upon which the word "Free" was emblazoned.

Considered a free black regardless of any potential Native American blood, Chavis continued to respect the ever-growing litany of legal ropes tightening around his liberty as North Carolina and Virginia increased restrictions. It was the color of his skin that mattered, and historians don't agree on what color that was ... it's just that it wasn't white. Whites despised free negroes, and considered them living examples of what slave-owners feared most: the embodiment of freedom for blacks.

Chavis carried no gun - and in some counties, not even a dog, for they were prohibited - to hunt, as counties allowing free blacks to own guns and dogs charged blacks cost-prohibitive licensing fees. Farming wasn't a long-term option, as the state could seize a black farmer's livestock to feed the poor white people in any church parish. Starting a business was risky, as free black entrepreneurs could not legally force white customers to pay.

Chavis made do during these years as a tutor for those who could afford to educate their children, and labored manually to fill the gaps.

In Charlotte County, and later, Southampton County, Chavis had family. One historian believes that a 1790 Southampton tax list locates John Chavis there, working for another black war veteran to make ends meet. In 1817,

he was back in Southampton on another tax list.

Socially, free blacks intermingled with indentured servants (black and white), other free blacks, and slaves. He took a wife named Fanny. No marriage records are evident, and could indicate that she was likely not totally free, or available to travel, when they married. In North Carolina until 1861, a free black could not own a slave, so Chavis could not likely have purchased Fanny until she was otherwise manumitted. No birth records for any children born to them have surfaced. Any children born to a black indentured servant or a slave mother would also have been slaves, and slave records are scant.

Sometime during the 1780s, Chavis made the acquaintance of Presbyterian minister Henry Patillo, possibly as Patillo preached in Nutbush, N.C. This chance encounter would change Chavis' life trajectory.

### The 1790s And A College Education

A "Great Awakening" swept through the Presbyterian faith, and synods wanting to spread the word of God planned missions to those less fortunate: the blacks.

A group of ministers who at one time had been affiliated with Hanover Presbytery took Chavis under their wing, possibly to help Patillo and the ministers tend to their "large and scattered" territory. Chavis was sent to college, at least in part, to see if blacks were educable.

First, the Presbyterian group attempted to make arrangements for Chavis to attend the University of New Jersey (now Princeton) and study under its president, John Witherspoon. Witherspoon's son-in-law, among others,

nominated Chavis for a scholarship in September 1792.

But Princeton records do not reflect Chavis' attendance at that college, or studying under Witherspoon.

Current Princeton University deputy spokesman Michael Hotchkiss told The News-Gazette that no records indicating John Chavis ever attended the University of New Jersey survive.

"John Chavis may have studied at the College of New Jersey, but records do not survive to confirm that," Hotchkiss said in an email.

Ill health left Witherspoon completely blind and infirm by 1792. Then-Vice President John Adams wrote about Witherspoon's precarious inability to remain upright due to vertigo. At the same time, the aged Witherspoon was embroiled in a legal battle regarding a misuse of college funds scandal, and attempting to arrange repair for Revolutionary War damage to the college. Witherspoon died in 1794, and the scholarship funds went to other recipients, as clearly noted in Princeton board of trustee minutes.

"Since, in over two hundred years, no evidence has ever surfaced suggesting otherwise, it is high time that the suggestion that Chavis attended college at Princeton should be discarded to the ash-heap of bad history," author Kent Wilcox wrote in 2018 in "The Lost History of Washington and Lee: New Discoveries, A Historical Performance Audit."

Instead, Chavis found himself at Liberty Hall in Lexington by the summer of 1795, as indicated by Washington and Lee Special Collections records. Perhaps the decision to send Chavis there was influenced also by the acquaintance of Patillo with Mary Graham

Sharp, the sister of William Graham, the first president of Liberty Hall Academy and rector of the Lexington Theological Seminary. Chavis may have been housed separately, though he was charged the same room rate of 3 "s" (shillings?) as other students. Classes for the academy and the seminary met in a newly constructed limestone structure on Mulberry Hill, doomed to burn in just a few short years.

Graham had studied under Witherspoon, and lectured using a good portion of Witherspoon's material. Graham left Liberty Hall (now Washington and Lee) the year after Chavis' arrival, arousing suspicion in some social circles that perhaps Graham had received negative response to admitting a black man, according to some biographers.

One Liberty Hall/Washington Academy student with whom Chavis became especially close was William McPheeters, who, like Chavis, was a candidate for the ministry there by the fall of 1799. Like Patillo's, McPheeters' friendship would be pivotal later.

Chavis completed the entire course of studies, comparable to today's bachelor's degree, excelling in Latin and Greek. No pomp-and-circumstance or ceremonial diploma was bestowed upon Chavis or other Liberty Hall graduates, such formalities still far in the future.

Thus John Chavis had become the only American free, black college graduate, an unheard of circumstance, and anathema to many Southerners who still obeyed laws dictating that enslaved blacks remain illiterate.

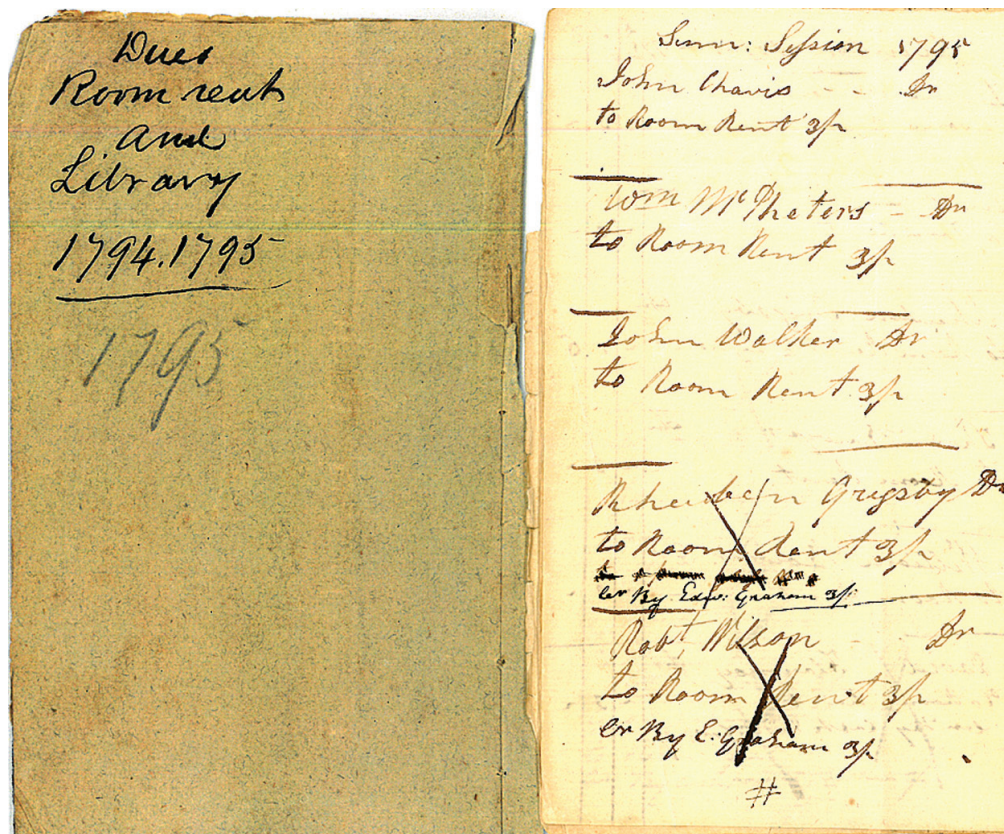
To acquire his preaching license, Chavis continued at Liberty Hall, but by then the name of the school had changed to Washington Academy. He dove into seminary study. At its conclusion, he was examined in multiple subjects and required to prepare sermons. Elders waived the science and language tests, reasoning that Chavis likely would not need those for ministering to those "of his own color" to whom he was specifically instructed to preach.

Chavis delivered a sterling performance, and was granted a preaching license Nov. 19, 1800, the church indicating that it was satisfied with his eloquence. It was in this time frame that he preached at Timber Ridge and the Lexington Presbytery.

The words and purpose of the Chavis sermons were to make slaves "better persons and more contented servants," and to be more obedient, according to Presbytery minutes. Patillo instructed that "those putting the idea of freedom into their heads were not their friends," and did not favor immediate emancipation. Chavis would not have preached emancipation, in accordance with his education.

Chavis' work was to be overseen by a four-minister committee, and they were to map his routes. Though never given a home church of his own, Chavis rode a three-state preaching circuit organizing sermons once, sometimes twice a month. His mission, by design, was peripatetic, moving from place to place for unspecified amounts of time, usually between two and nine months annually. In 1801, Chavis earned about \$58 preaching for the Presbyterians.

Next week, *The News-Gazette* continues its look at Chavis' life, starting with his years as a free black preacher and then as an educator.



W&L SPECIAL COLLECTIONS includes this record of "room rent and library" payments for John Chavis (top right) during the summer of 1795, placing him squarely on the campus of Liberty Hall Academy at that time. Below is the notation of another attendee, William McPheeters, whose relationship with Chavis would become pivotal in Chavis' later years. Both men were charged 3 "s," likely shillings, for their keep.



# Chavis' Rise And Fall

## *Respected Educator Would Face Poverty*

*Editor's note: Last week, The News-Gazette began a two-part series detailing the life of John Chavis, for whom Robinson Hall was officially renamed in a dedication ceremony Saturday at Washington and Lee University.*

*In the first part, Chavis' life was recounted from his years as a Revolutionary War soldier to how he became the first college-degreed black man in America and began preaching for the Presbyterians.*

**BY LISA PERRY**

After a slave uprising near Richmond at the beginning of the 19th century, all free blacks were required to have "free papers" to prove they weren't chattel, including John Chavis.

Then 40 years old, Chavis gathered

*See Chavis, page 2*



ELIZABETH MUGO, a senior at Washington and Lee and president of the Executive Committee of the student body, speaks at the dedication of Chavis Hall Saturday afternoon. Behind her to the left is history professor Dr. Ted DeLaney, who was a member of the Commission on Institutional History and Community that advocated changing the name of Robinson Hall. (Shelby Mack photo for W&L)



*In his Raleigh school, Chavis separated the races, conducting classes for whites for \$2.50 per quarter, and for blacks in the evening for a reduced price of \$1.75.*

## Chavis

*continued from page 1*  
up all necessary information to vouch for his validity as a free citizen (including his Washington Academy education) and presented it to Rockbridge County Court in 1802, a time in which any black had questionable standing in court. The sworn legal document was signed by some Washington Academy trustees, including one who was also a Rockbridge County court magistrate. Several testified they knew Chavis personally.

Chavis, who had been granted a preaching license in 1800, was in the midst of a busy preaching schedule for the Presbyterians.

During one mission to western Virginia in 1803, Chavis wrote in his journal that he preached 23 sermons to no fewer than 3,000 constituents in 16 different venues, including courthouses, private homes, and churches. At least 750 of those who heard Chavis speak did so at locations in Rockbridge County, Lexington, or at Falling Spring. He earned \$7.74 for this mission.

Throughout the spiritual revival during which Chavis preached, sermons and “camp meetings” were intensely emotional affairs. The congregation usually walked together to an outdoor location, singing refrains from popular revival hymns. Once a campsite was arranged, ministers (usually more than one) would make their way through the gathering, shaking hands and greeting each member lovingly. Flickering campfire lights, a shared meal, darkness all around, and more singing added to the intensity. It was common for some worshippers to fall to the ground, weeping or twitching, church records indicate.

*“Take your companion by the hand*

*And all your children in the band”* were lyrics Chavis likely sang.

Of the congregants whom Chavis listed in his journal for the 1803 mission, only about 420 of them were black. Presbyterians implied that Chavis had not been properly attentive to black instruction.

Chavis countered that blacks seemed to prefer the “emotional and illiterate exhortation” of a fellow bondsman to the sermon of a man of education and dignity, as relayed by a missions committee clerk’s condensed version of Chavis’ report. Some ministers began to view Chavis’ popularity with the whites as a challenge, and stimulated Chavis to greater fidelity to blacks in the future.

Chavis made the next mission rounds in Mecklenburg, Lunenburg and Notoway counties in Virginia, and Granville, Wake, Orange and Chatham counties, among others, in North Carolina. He was able to deliver 68 sermons during a subsequent mission to about 7,000 people, roughly 1,880 of them blacks. In 1806, Chavis was sent to Maryland, his final mission while employed by the Presbyterian General Assembly.

After 1807, Chavis continued preaching, but through conversations with his neighbors, and by invitation to a pulpit from time to time, including the Orange Presbytery in North Carolina, and Nutbush, where he and Presbyterian minister Henry Patillo



W&L PRESIDENT WILLIAM DUDLEY addresses those gathered for the dedication of Chavis Hall Saturday. Since 1936, the front-campus building had been named for John Robinson, one of the school’s earliest benefactors. Last May, the school’s Institutional History and Community Commission urged that the building be renamed because it was built with the proceeds from the sale of slaves that Robinson had bequeathed to Washington College. Last October, the board of trustees voted to change the name of the building to Chavis Hall. (Shelby Mack photo)

may have become acquainted so many years before.

Chavis was described by the Orange Presbytery as “dark brown,” suggesting no mix of race visible to the eye. Usually dressed in a suit of black homespun highlighted by a spotless, white linen cravat, Chavis’ round, benevolent face was framed by hair that had turned completely white by the 1830s. He was described as “corpulent” and “robust,” standing about 5 feet, 7 inches tall. His speech and elocution was smooth and contained no “negroisms,” according to witness accounts.

Chavis’ chief vocation then turned to education.

### Founding a School

Chavis was drawn to Raleigh, Wake County, N.C., by 1808, where he began a school for children of black and white moneyed families who could afford tuition, at times boarding them where he lived. His school, however,

them setting an example both in behavior and scholarship, which their white superiors might take pride in imitating, was a cheering spectacle to a philanthropist. The exercises throughout, evinced a degree of attention and assiduous care on the part of the instructor, highly creditable, and of attainment on the part of his scholars almost incredible. We were also much pleased with the sensible address which closed the examination. The object of the respectable teacher, was to impress on the scholars, the fact, that they occupied an inferior and subordinate station in society, and were possessed but of limited privileges; but that even they might become useful in their particular sphere by making a proper improvement of the advantages afforded them.”

### An Influential Friend

Between 1808 and 1832, Chavis conducted schools, wrote to influential politicians with whom he had become ac-

quainted, traveled to see family, moonlighted as a laborer, and preached the occasional sermon.

One influential politician with whom he kept up correspondence was Wake County resident Willie P. Mangum, who later became U.S. Senate President Pro Tempore. The two met when Chavis arbitrated a dispute between Mangum and North Carolina Gov. John Owen.

It was a favor Mangum never forgot, and he treated Chavis with the utmost respect afterward. According to one witness, “(Mangum and his friends) had their slaves to wait on him [Chavis] as if he were white, but when meal

time came he was served in a room by himself and they each had a special outroom for his chamber.”

For a white person to socialize with a black person at that time was unheard of. Chavis broke through many color barriers such as having a social relationship with whites.

### A Slave Owner?

Was John Chavis, a free man of color, a slave owner himself?

Records and writings indicate that he may well have been, but if he was, it also may not have been that unusual.

Through the Mangum-Chavis correspondence and Presbyterian records, it becomes clear that Chavis and Fanny probably had overcome whatever obstacles that prevented them from living together by at least 1831 or 1832. The possibility that Fanny had been a slave or an indentured servant leaves the door open that other family

took a devastating toll on the aging Chavis’ livelihood. Some sources say Nat Turner paid the price with drawn-and-quartered dismemberment and skinning after his execution, his flesh tanned and bones cobbled into mementoes. Black preachers were blamed for inciting Turner (also a minister himself), specifically those in eastern counties. That led to new laws to strip black teachers, including Chavis, of their vocation.

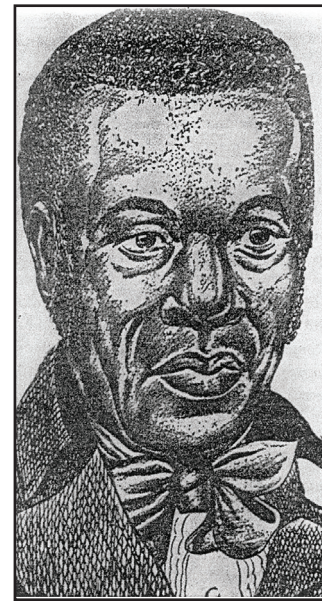
At nearly 70, Chavis was too feeble for manual labor. Chavis published at least one sermon to raise funds, but the effort was not enough to offset the level of poverty to which he had fallen. The Richmond Enquirer reported twice in 1839 that delegates had introduced petitions to the state legislature on behalf of the heirs of John Chavis “praying the renewal of certificates and making allowance for the services of their father in the Revolution,” indicating Chavis, even after death, had not received pay for his Revolutionary military service.

Chavis turned to Mangum, asking the senator and his friends to send him more of their children to teach, which they did not do.

Chavis’ old friend from his school days in Lexington, William McPheeters, then active in the Orange Presbytery and Raleigh city government, came to his aid. As the Orange Presbytery advised Chavis to heed the law and stop teaching, they too voted to raise money for the impoverished Chavises. Collections were taken up and allotted to the aged couple. At this time, the Orange Presbytery still referred to Chavis as a “licentiate,” meaning he had never been fully ordained.

### Final Degradation

By 1835, North Carolina



THIS SKETCH by an unknown artist found in a 1956 book by J.A. Rogers entitled “Africa’s Gift To America” is the only known likeness of John Chavis. (image courtesy of Washington and Lee Special Collections)

ing issue. He’d like to visit, he conveyed, “... if I can get any clothes fit to wear, for I am naked at this time, and how I am to be clothed, I don’t know.” The Chavises had been reduced to selling all their property and living with friends who could take them in.

Chavis was dead by June 1838. No records detailing his death or burial have surfaced. A biographer, Helen Chavis Othow, who claims she is a descendant, writes that whites beat him to death to punish him for his continued instruction of blacks. Othow believes his body is interred on the Mangum estate, and has located a plot with a weathered marker upon which the letters “J.C.” are inscribed. His remains have never been positively identified.

The Orange Presbytery claimed it continued to support his widow, Fanny, until 1842, when records indicate she no longer required help. An 1850 Moore County, N.C., census lists a blind, black, 85-year-old, Virginia-born Fanny Chavis as a poorhouse resident. Fanny’s death or burial records haven’t come to light.

### Legacy

John Chavis is honored today in North Carolina’s Founding Fathers Hall of Fame in Raleigh. That city’s memorial park also bears his name, as does a federal apartment complex. Creeks, bridges, roads, and a middle school throughout central North Carolina bear the Chavis moniker.

In 1986, the John Chavis House was dedicated at Washington and Lee University as residence and cultural center for minority students. A board room at the school also bears his name.

The Washington and Lee board of trustees voted in October to rename Robinson Hall after Chavis.

Perhaps officials will one day prove his final resting place and cause of death that would determine whether he was murdered for his beliefs.

Historical pretext may blur as researchers attempt to unravel the thread of the tapestry that is John Chavis, but a satin strand securely cinches Chavis, the first college-degreed black man in America, to deep respect, mentorship and trailblazing.

*‘How I am to be clothed, I don’t know.’ -John Chavis*

was nearly as peripatetic as his preaching, following those who could pay into multiple counties, and in session until money ran out.

During down times, Chavis may have returned to Southampton and other counties to work and visit family, which could explain Chavis’ presence on county tax lists and court documents other than where his schools were located. Exorbitant free black transit fees and varying levels of emancipation prohibited easy travel among black families, and prevented many a man, wife and child from cohabitating.

In his Raleigh school, Chavis separated the races, conducting classes for whites for \$2.50 per quarter, and for blacks in the evening for a reduced price of \$1.75. An education by Chavis was prized, as evidenced in a review a Raleigh Register newspaper editor wrote in 1830:

“On Friday last, we attended an examination of the free children of color, attached to the school conducted by John Chavis, also colored, but a regularly educated Presbyterian minister, and we have seldom received more gratification from any exhibition of a similar character. To witness a well regulated school, composed of this class of persons - to see



NORTH CAROLINA Sen. Willie P. Mangum was a longtime friend of John Chavis. (image courtesy of Washington and Lee Special Collections)

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members could also have been slaves.

An 1830 Charlotte County, Va., census lists a John Chavis as the head of a household that includes a slave woman between 24 and 35 years old. Famed Harvard-educated historian Carter Woodson listed a slave owner named John Chavis in Charlotte County, and Raleigh News and Observer founder and owner Samuel A’Court Ashe included John Chavis as a slave owner in his work, “History of North Carolina.”

“Many other free negroes likewise were slave owners. One who had served in the Revolution, John Chavis, not only was a slaveholder but was a school-teacher, having among his pupils some boys who afterwards became men of renown. He was also a Presbyterian minister,” Ashe wrote.

“Often free blacks purchased family members, a spouse or children,” explained Washington and Lee professor Dr. Ted DeLaney. “Nobody understood free-black ownership of black slaves better than historian Carter G. Woodson, who explains that often free black ownership of slaves was philanthropic.”

### After Nat Turner

The Nat Turner slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831