

Chavis, John ^[1]

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Chavis, John

by Barbara M. Parramore, 1979

ca. 1763–15 June 1838

John Chavis, preacher and teacher, was probably the "indentured servant named John Chavis" mentioned in the inventory of the estate of [Halifax](#) ^[2] attorney [James Milner](#) ^[3] in 1773, though little is definitely known of Chavis's early years. Milner, whose private library was one of the best and largest in North Carolina, was closely connected with the Mangum, Willie, and Jones families of Sussex County, Va., where he appears to have lived before coming to Halifax in about 1766. The Reverend William Willie of Sussex, whose surname was preserved in the branches of the Mangum and Jones families who moved to North Carolina, was beneficiary of the Greek and Latin volumes in Milner's estate and may have played a role in Chavis's training and education after Milner's death.

Chavis enlisted in December 1778 in the Fifth Virginia Regiment and served for three years in the [Revolutionary War](#) ^[4]. Captain Mayo Carington, in a bounty warrant written in March 1783, certified that Chavis had "faithfully fulfilled [his duties] and is thereby entitled to all immunities granted to three year soldiers." In a 1789 tax list of Mecklenburg County, Va., Chavis was shown as a free black whose property consisted of a single horse. In the same year he was employed by Robert Greenwood's estate as tutor to Greenwood's orphans.

It is generally accepted that Chavis attended the Presbyterian Washington Academy, now Washington and Lee University. A certificate made out in Rockbridge County, Va., on 6 Apr. 1802 attests that John Chavis was known to the court and considered a free man and "also that he has been a student at Washington Academy where he went through a regular course of Academical studies." A certificate of 8 Nov. 1802 acknowledged that Chavis was a free black, forty years of age (indicating that his birth was in 1762 or 1763).

[Charles Lee Smith](#) ^[5] and [John Spencer Bassett](#) ^[6], in 1888 and 1889, respectively, reported the tradition that Chavis studied at Princeton as a private student of Dr. John Witherspoon, then president of the college. No official records exist to prove the report, but recorded in the minutes of the trustees of Princeton University is the 26 Sept. 1792 recommendation of the Reverend John Blair Smith that "Mr. John Todd Henry of Virginia and John Chavis, a free black man of that state . . . be received" on the Leslie Fund. Besides his formal duties with the college, Dr. Witherspoon is known to have conducted private classes for graduates and others studying for the ministry; Chavis probably attended these classes. He may, in addition, have attended some classes at the college itself, but his name does not appear among either the graduates or the former students there. That his education was exceptional for the age is apparent from his later writings, especially his correspondence with [Willie P. Mangum](#) ^[7], as well as from his professional activities. He was almost certainly the most learned black of his time in the South, and perhaps in the United States.

On 19 Oct. 1799, Chavis requested from the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia a license as a preacher, which was granted on 19 Nov. 1800. The record shows that "The said Jon Chavis [was voted a license] to preach the Gospel of Christ as a probationer for the holy ministry within the bounds of this Presbytery, or wherever he shall be orderly called, hoping as he is a man of colour, he may be peculiarly useful to those of his own complexion." Six months later, at his own request, he was transferred to the Hanover Presbytery, recommended by the Lexington Presbytery "as a man of exemplary piety, and possessed of many qualifications which merit their respectful attention."

From 1801 to 1807, Chavis served the General Assembly of the [Presbyterian Church](#) ^[8] as a missionary to slaves in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. He was provided a horse and funds for lodging. Dr. Archibald Alexander, a Princeton trustee and one of the founders of the Princeton Theological Seminary, was one of a committee of four to help Chavis in the discharge of his duties. Many of Chavis's reports of the religious conditions in places he visited, indicating the number of people in attendance at meetings he held, appear in the *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church* and *The Associations Missionary Magazine or Evangelical Intelligencer*.

Chavis was a preacher both to blacks and to whites; he preached to and moved freely among white Presbyterians. In January 1802, Ann Smith, daughter of Samuel Smith in [Granville County](#) ^[9], wrote that she had heard of the Great Revival at Hawfields from Mr. Chavis and from William Webb, her uncle. Moses Hoge, later to become president of Hampden-Sydney College, wrote in 1802 about receiving reports of congregational activity from Mr. J. Chavis.

Chavis located in Raleigh in 1807 or 1808, where the Orange Presbytery, which included Raleigh, accepted him as a

licentiate in 1809. Although never ordained or assigned a regular pastorate, Chavis preached until 1832. After the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, blacks were restricted by law from preaching. Samuel Smith Downey and William McPheeters ^[10], a minister in Raleigh, were among the members of a committee appointed by the Orange Presbytery to assume responsibility for the care of Chavis and his wife. The presbytery decided to give him fifty dollars a year beginning in 1834 and apparently did so until his death in 1838. His wife was aided until April 1842, when it was reported that she was residing with friends. Her name is thought to have been Fanny or Frances; the 1840 Granville County census shows the name "Fanny Chavis, female, free colored, aged 36-55"; the editor of the papers of Willie P. Mangum gives her name as Frances Chavis. No children are known to have been born to Chavis and his wife.

In North Carolina, Chavis is better known for his teaching, which began in Raleigh ^[11] as early as 1808. Through ads in the *Raleigh Register* on 25 Aug. and 1 Sept. of that year, he announced the opening of his school with a dual plan of organization: white students attended during the day and black students in the evening until ten o'clock. For a quarter century, Chavis taught in several counties, including Wake, Granville, and Chatham. It was known that he was a "good Latin and a fair Greek scholar." Willie P. Mangum was invited to attend his school examination in 1828. The editor of the *Raleigh Register* reported on 22 Apr. 1830 his attendance at the examination "of free children of color, attached to the school conducted by John Chavis. . . ."

Chavis was received as an equal in the homes of whites, and no letters written by him to whites reveal any evidence of social inequality. Prominent white families believed to have sent children to study under Chavis include the Mangums, Manlys, Harrises, Hendersons, Horners, Edwardses, Enlows, and Hargroves. Often named as his pupils are Priestly H. Mangum, brother of Willie P. Mangum; Charles Manly ^[12], a North Carolina governor; J. M. Horner ^[13]; Archibald E. and John L. Henderson, sons of Chief Justice Henderson; and Abram Rencher ^[14]. Some white students, including J. M. Horner, appear to have boarded in the Chavis home in order to attend the school session.

That Willie P. Mangum, U.S. senator, studied under Chavis is disputed by some. Their friendship bespeaks a teacher-pupil relationship, however. Chavis wrote long and intimate letters to Mangum for more than a decade, often criticizing the senator's political positions. He was critical of Mangum's support of Andrew Jackson ^[15], for whom he felt a great distaste. His political beliefs clearly label him a Federalist ^[16]. He was opposed to the abolition of slavery, saying, "That Slavery is a national evil no one doubts, but what is to be done? . . . make the best of a bad bargain." Having already lost the right to preach, he was denied the franchise in 1835. In September 1833, in an effort to earn money, he sent the presbytery "An Essay on the Atonement" and asked for help in publishing it. With or without the presbytery's assistance, the essay was published under the title *Chavis' Letter upon the Doctrine of the Atonement of Christ* (Raleigh, 1837).

The Oxford *Torchlight* of 28 Sept. 1880 reported that Chavis had died "at his residence between Oxford and Williamsboro, leaving descendants who are yet in the county. The writer remembers to have seen him when a short time before his death several of his white pupils, prominent gentlemen, called to see him. Chavis was then advanced in years, his white hair forming a strange contrast to his ebony face for he was of unmixed African descent. His manners were dignified yet respectful and entirely unassuming and his conversation sprightly and interesting." A Richmond Presbyterian paper reported his death in Orange County ^[17] in the only other known obituary. Chavis Park in Raleigh, named in his honor, is located near the site of his school.

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