

Cheshire, Joseph Blount ^[1]

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by Jaquelin Drane Nash, 1979

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Joseph Blount Cheshire, [Episcopal](#) ^[2]clergyman and botanist, was born in [Edenton](#) ^[3], the second of nine children, of whom only he and two sisters grew to maturity. His father was John Cheshire, a successful merchant, shipowner, and proprietor of a shipyard and [ropewalk](#) ^[4]. His mother, born Elizabeth Ann Blount, was great-great-granddaughter of James Blount of [Chowan County](#) ^[5], the first of the name to come to North Carolina.

Cheshire was educated at the Edenton Academy and at the Episcopal School for Boys at Raleigh, now St. Mary's College. The illness and death of his father caused a reverse in the family fortunes and brought his formal schooling to an end in his sixteenth year. He was befriended by [James Cathcart Johnston](#) ^[6] of Edenton, a prominent lawyer, who recommended him as a student in the law offices of [Thomas P. Devereux](#) ^[7] of Raleigh. He received his license in 1836, returning to Edenton to begin the practice of law. In 1837 he was licensed for the superior and supreme courts. Johnston gave him a valuable law library and a horse and buggy and desired that the young man should come and live with him at his plantation, Hayes. Cheshire declined the offer, feeling that he should remain with his mother and young sisters.

While in Raleigh, Cheshire was confirmed in the Episcopal church and became an active and devout churchman. After two years of law practice in Edenton, he realized that his true calling was to the church. With the funds realized from the sale of Johnston's gifts (his benefactor being unwilling to take them back), he returned to Raleigh to study theology under the personal supervision of Bishop [Levi Silliman Ives](#) ^[8]. A fellow student who became a lifelong friend was [Moses Ashely Curtis](#) ^[9], later an eminent botanist. Cheshire's natural bent for horticulture, which later was to come to rich fruition, had its beginning at this time.

By Bishop Ives, Cheshire was ordained deacon in Christ Church, Raleigh, February 1840, and priest in St. James's Church, Wilmington, 9 May 1841. He was sent by the bishop to Windsor and [Halifax](#) ^[10] but soon was invited to come and hold services at Scotland Neck. Here he established Trinity Church, remaining its rector for thirty-five years. In 1855 the brick church, the second in the community to bear the name of Trinity, was built under his direction.

Tarboro was without an active minister in the early 1840s, and its congregation was dwindling. Cheshire was asked to come there to preach, and so successful was this visit that he received a call to become rector of Tarboro in October 1842. For a time he divided his time among his four churches, but in 1848 the churches in Halifax and Windsor passed into other hands. For the next twenty years he was rector at both Trinity Church, Scotland Neck, and Calvary Church, Tarboro.

Cheshire was married on 8 Feb. 1843 to Elizabeth Toole Parker (1820–95), the daughter of his senior warden at Calvary Church, Theophilus Parker. Their children were the Right Reverend [Joseph Blount, Jr.](#) ^[11] (1850–1932), fifth bishop of North Carolina, who married first Annie Huske Webb and second Elizabeth Landsdale Mitchell; Theophilus Parker (1852–93), who married Ida Staton; Annie Gray (1859–1951), who married Samuel Simpson Nash, and Katherine Drane (1862–1935). Several infants died early.

In 1869, Cheshire resigned his charge at Scotland Neck, ill health making the twenty-five-mile trip between the two parishes infeasible. His tenure at Tarboro continued until his retirement in 1892, covering a half century of service.

At every church he served, Cheshire beautified the surrounding grounds, sending near and far for cuttings, seeds, and plants of native and exotic varieties. The resulting churchyard gardens in these four Eastern North Carolina towns, particularly in Tarboro, are well known to students of horticulture and garden lovers alike.

Calvary's small wooden church soon becoming inadequate for the Tarboro congregation, a larger brick edifice was begun in 1859. The new church was planned to seat five hundred people, although the congregation then boasted but thirty-five families. Not a cent of debt was at any time incurred. The [Civil War](#) ^[12] interrupted the work, and the church was boarded up; but in 1866 a good cotton crop enabled the congregation to resume construction. The handsome church was consecrated 10 May 1868 by Bishop Thomas A. Atkinson.

During the war, Dr. Cheshire (who had been presented a D.D. by Madison College, Sharon, Miss., in 1861) was one of those involved in the printing of the only edition ever issued of the *Prayer Book of the Confederate States*. Five bales of cotton were sent to England by blockade-runners, and their sale, at \$196.20 each, financed the publication. The only difference between the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and the new Confederate Prayer Book was the substitution of the word "Confederate" for the word "United," and an oversight left in one prayer the offending "United."

Shortly after the end of the war, Cheshire, with Bishop Atkinson and a few southern clergymen, attended the general convention of the church in Philadelphia in October 1865. Antisouthern feeling had been at its most intense in

Philadelphia, and fears were voiced for the safety of the delegates. They were received with great kindness by their hosts, however, and their courage in this venture brought about a healing of the division between the factions and the eventual restoration of the church to its prewar unity.

For thirty-seven years without a break, Cheshire attended his own diocesan convention. A faithful country parson of the old school and a strong and moving preacher, he reached out to rich and poor, white and black. He conducted regular Sunday afternoon services for his black parishioners; they attended with the white congregation for communion and for confirmation. In 1873, Cheshire founded St. Luke's, consisting of eighteen black communicants, as the first black parish in the Diocese of North Carolina.

Cheshire's health failed, and he resigned as rector, becoming rector emeritus in 1889. The last public service he conducted as a minister of the church was the funeral of his wife in 1893. He was buried in Calvary churchyard.

A portrait in charcoal by his daughter, Kate, hangs in the sacristy of [Calvary Church](#) [13].

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