

## Freeman, Ralf <sup>[1]</sup>

### Freeman, Ralf

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#### fl. 1807–31

Ralf Freeman, [Baptist](#) <sup>[2]</sup> minister, was born enslaved in [Anson County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>; his parents are not known. He belonged to John Culpeper, a Baptist minister and pastor of the Rocky River Baptist Church, Anson County. Most of the information concerning this early black pastor comes from George W. Purefoy's [history of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Freeman was probably baptized by the Rocky River Baptist Church, of which he became a member. Within a short time, when it was discovered that he had the ability to preach, he was licensed by the church. Soon afterward he was ordained and began to preach in the counties of Moore, Randolph, and Davidson.

In 1801, [John Culpeper](#) <sup>[5]</sup> was elected a member of the North Carolina House of Commons from Anson County. In 1806, he won election to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Seventh District, serving in 1807–9, 1813–17, 1819–21, 1823–25, and 1827–29. When he rode off to Washington, he left the church and congregation of Rocky River in the hands of his servant Ralf, who then began his own years of service to the church. In imitation of John Culpeper, his preaching was forceful, his faith firm, and he handled his master's flock with unusual ability. He officiated at sacraments and burials, made pastoral calls, and attended to numerous church duties. He was also frequently called upon to preach at the annual meetings of the Pee Dee Baptist Association and was held in high regard by all who knew him.

Freeman served as a delegate from Rocky River to the Sandy Creek Baptist Association in the period 1807–10. In 1809, he was listed as "Elder Ralf (a colored minister)." In 1811, he was a delegate from the Sandy Creek Baptist Association to the Raleigh Baptist Association. At this session he was listed as "Elder Ralf Freeman." Before then he had been listed as "Ralf" with no surname. Thus he evidently received his freedom sometime during 1810–11. He continued to represent the church as a delegate through 1814. He also preached the Sunday sermon at the Sandy Creek Association in 1809 and 1814. Purefoy says that he was a good reader and was well read in the Scriptures.

The earliest minutes of Rocky River Baptist Church are for 5 Apr. 1828, when Ralf Freeman was in attendance and led the church in prayer. He was also listed in the black male section of the church roll for 1828. In May 1828 he assisted in the establishment of the Brown Creek Baptist Church. That fall he was elected as a delegate to the Pee Dee Baptist Association. In May 1830 he helped organize the Kendalls Baptist Church, and in July of the same year he was appointed to attend to the constitution of the arm of the Fork of Little River at Suggs Creek.

Purefoy described Freeman as being of common size, "perfectly black," with a smiling countenance, especially when conducting religious services. One writer recorded that "he would have no money for preaching; he only wanted food and clothing." At the session of the Pee Dee Baptist Association held with the church at Elizabeth, a preacher from Charleston, S.C., recommended that Freeman give the Sunday sermon. He had heard of Ralf and had come to hear him preach. Freeman did preach on "The Temptation of Christ." In the middle of the sermon he read the passage, "All these things will I give thee"; then, smiling at the congregation, he said, "Poor devil, he didn't have a foot of land in the world."

Freeman became a close friend of Elder Joseph Magee, a Baptist minister. They preached and traveled together, and both agreed that the survivor would preach at the other's funeral. Magee moved to Tennessee and died first. At his death he bequeathed to Freeman his riding horse, overcoat, Bible, and fifty dollars in cash; he also requested that Freeman preach at his funeral. In company with a white brother, Freeman rode to Tennessee to carry out the wish of his friend. At the conclusion of his sermon the congregation contributed fifty dollars to his support.

Freeman's career worsened in the aftermath of the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Va., in 1831, when restrictions on enslaved and free black people were tightened. Black people were forbidden to preach or exhort in public or in any way officiate as preacher or teacher at prayer meetings or meetings for worship where enslaved people of different enslavers were gathered.

The last record of Freeman is in 1831. According to one writer it is probable that Freeman died in the fellowship of the Primitive or Antimission Baptists, but this was more by accident than by choice. When the arm of Rocky River at Bethlehem (near Ansonville) became a regular church in March 1831, Freeman moved his membership there. The church later became Primitive and soon afterward extinct. Freeman was buried in the church cemetery by his white friends and a small stone was placed at the head of his grave. In 1907, this was replaced by a more substantial memorial marker.

Freeman's wife was probably named Genny, (as listed in the 1828 church roll). Their daughter, Judy, married Abraham McRae. Abraham and Judy had a daughter, Sarah Jane, who became the wife of Allen Ratliff and the mother of William Martin Ratliff.

#### References:

E. M. Brooks, *History of Rocky River Baptist Church* (1928).

Ralf Freeman biography folder (Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem).

George W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association from its Organization in A.D. 1758, to A.D. 1858* (1859). <sup>[6]</sup>

#### **Additional Resources:**

"Ralf Freeman." N.C. Highway Historical Marker K-57, N.C. Office of Archives & History.  
<https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=K-57> <sup>[7]</sup> (accessed February 28, 2014).

North Carolina General Assembly. *Journals of the Senate and House of Commons of the General Assembly of North Carolina at its session in 1832/1833*. Raleigh [N.C.]: Charles R. Ramsay, Printer to the State. 1833. 30, 39, 166, 182, 199.  
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/journals-of-the-senate-and-house-of-commons-of-the-general-assembly-of-north-carolina-at-its-...-1832-1833-session/2690594?item=2761375> <sup>[8]</sup> (accessed February 28, 2014).

Coon, Charles L. "4. Ralph Freeman Must Not Preach." *Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina, A Documentary History, 1790-1840*, Vol. 2. Raleigh [N.C.]: Edwards & Broughton Printing Co. 1908. 536-537.  
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/beginnings-of-public-education-in-north-carolina-a-documentary-history-1790-1840-vol.-2/2255772?item=2261507> <sup>[9]</sup> (accessed February 28, 2014).

#### **Subjects:**

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Black and African American People <sup>[11]</sup>

Religious Leaders and Clergy <sup>[12]</sup>

#### **Authors:**

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[15]</sup>

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