

Read, Jesse ^[1]

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1744–6 June 1820

Jesse Read, revolutionary War officer, Baptist minister, and historian, apparently was born in Isle of Wight County, Va. His father, Harmon Read, bought land in [Halifax County](#) ^[2], N.C., and died there in 1767, bequeathing to his son the home plantation. His mother, Mary Pendry Read, died testate in 1781, and he and his brother Moses served as joint executors of her comfortable estate. The writings of Jesse Read reveal few details of his labors in the ministry and modestly fail to include any reference to his youth in Halifax County or to his military career of five years in the Continental Line.

Early in the Revolution—on 20 Oct. 1776—he entered the Sixth North Carolina Regiment with the rank of second lieutenant. He was advanced to first lieutenant on 25 Oct. 1777 and to captain on 15 Oct. 1781, serving until the cessation of hostilities. He had transferred to the Second North Carolina Regiment on 1 June 1778 and to the Third Regiment on 1 Jan. 1781. Not long after his capture at the [Battle of Eutaw Springs](#) ^[3] on 8 Sept. 1781, he was exchanged and soon returned to private life. Several surviving vouchers provide details of the final settlement at Halifax of payments authorized for his military service. On 10 Nov. 1796 Read was also issued a bounty land warrant, which he later sold to Henry Wiggins.

During the remainder of his life the Reverend Mr. Read appears to have preferred that his associates remember him only for his life as a religious leader. In 1767 he first began to take a serious interest in the salvation of his soul, and about 1770 he set aside a piece of land on which he and other recent converts erected a meeting-house near Rocky Swamp—about ten miles north of Enfield in Halifax County. In 1773 he was baptized by Elder Jeremiah Walker into the membership of the Rocky Swamp Baptist Church, which was still a branch of the Lower Fishing Creek Baptist Church.

The church was constituted with eight members on 11 July 1774 by Elders Walker, John Tanner, and Joseph Anthony. On 5 May 1775 Read was ordained to the ministry and installed as the regular pastor by Elders Anthony and Samuel Harris. He took his church into the [Kehukee Association](#) ^[4] on 9 Aug. 1777, and in subsequent years he was frequently appointed a messenger to visit other associations. On 15 May 1784 he was placed on a committee of four to attempt a union between the Separate and Regular Baptists, which was finally accomplished on 10 Oct. 1789. When the United Association met at Bear Creek Church in [Lenoir County](#) ^[5] on 13 Sept. 1792, he was one of three ministers "appointed a Committee to prepare a form of ceremony to solemnize the rite of matrimony."

In 1801 Elder Read assisted Elder [Lemuel Burkitt](#) ^[6] in ordaining [Joshua Lawrence](#) ^[7] at the Fishing Creek Baptist Church, known subsequently as Lawrence's Meeting House. (Elder Lawrence would follow them later, in both pulpit and press, as a powerful defender of the Primitive Baptist faith and practice.) On 30 Sept. 1803 Read was chosen for the first time to fill the office of moderator of the Kehukee Baptist Association, and he was elevated to that honor once again on 5 Oct. 1816.

Read gradually came to be recognized as one of the ablest ministers in the association. He also was generally esteemed for his literary talent and solid financial worth. Between 1780 and 1797 he was named executor of the wills of eight associates. Some idea of his success as a planter may be formed from his possession of over 1,400 acres and the eleven people he enslaved by 1790; the property given to his children was even more substantial. He has continued to be remembered principally because of his collaboration with Lemuel Burkitt in the writing of *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association* ^[8] and its publication at Halifax in 1803. That unique work provided the foundation upon which rests the early history of the Baptists of eastern North Carolina.

The Raleigh *Register* of 16 June 1820 carried the following obituary: "DIED, At his late residence in Halifax County, on the 6th inst. in the 76th year of his age, the Rev. Jesse Read, late Pastor of the Baptist Church at Rocky Swamp Meeting House, for forty-five years. He was confined to his bed for the last six months, but with the most exemplary piety and perfect resignation to the will of his heavenly father, anxiously waiting until his change should come."

The brief holograph will of Elder Read named only two sons, Stephen, who married Doretha Eelbeck, daughter of [Montfort Eelbeck](#) ^[9] of Halifax County, and Rhesa, a wealthy planter who married Fanny Carstarphen, daughter of James Carstarphen; but a daughter, Lydia, had married Henry Elisha Horn, only son of Colonel Henry Horn of Edgecombe County, and had died in 1809, leaving several children. Contemporary census listings suggest the probability of two unidentified daughters, while the name of Read's wife also is unknown.

References:

Lemuel Burkitt, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association* ^[8] (1803, 1834, 1850).

Walter Clark, ed., *State Records of North Carolina* ^[10], vols. 11 (1895), 22 (1907).

C. C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West*^[11] (1916).

Raleigh *Register*, 16 June 1820.

Roster of Soldiers from North Carolina in the American Revolution(1932).

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Authors:

Johnston, Hugh B., Jr. ^[15]

Origin - location:

Halifax County ^[16]

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