

# John and Rutha Banks Cobb Thames

*by Joe & JoAnn Pecenka*

## Beginning at the end

Traveling south on Interstate 65 out of Birmingham one passes through Shelby County into Chilton County. Taking the Jemison exit (County Road 42 into Jemison) and going east quickly brings one to a crossroad with County Road 51, which meanders through the countryside roughly paralleling the Interstate. After turning left onto County Road 51, and going for some 1.3 miles, the road swings left and crosses southwest over the Interstate. About a mile past the Interstate it comes to the Rocky Mount Methodist Church on the left and Rocky Mount Cemetery on the right (a total distance of approximately 3 miles). Toward the center rear of the cemetery is a large, rounded tombstone of Rutha Thames. It reads:

This is the last I can do for you.

Mother



RUTHA B.

wife of John Thames,

born Dec. 10, 1804,

died Aug. 6, 1885.

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For we know across the river  
Wait the loved ones gone before

Calera M.A.

The first line follows the curvature at the top of the stone. It may be ascribed to “Mother” since there is an open book (Bible?) between that term and Rutha’s name. The last line probably indicates the nearby town where the stone was purchased, carved by “M.A.” The stone has a large crack through it that has been repaired several times; an additional ground marker has recently been placed, inscribed only with her name, and birth and death dates.

Rutha is appropriately buried here, because Rocky Mount was her church and she donated the land for the cemetery. Many of her family and friends are buried here. For a short time it was known as the Thames Cemetery until there were objections and the sign was removed. It is likely that because there are many surnames represented by the burials there that it was more appropriately the church cemetery, hence the current name of Rocky Mount. If one examines all

of the names on all of the tombstones the question that cannot be avoided is: "Where is Rutha's husband John?"

John is buried in the Old Rocky Mount Cemetery. Starting over again at the crossroads of County Road 51 and the Interstate exit, one must go north again, but only for about one mile. The cemetery is what appears to be a grove of trees in a pasture on the left side of the road, about 125 yards from the road (SE1/4 SW1/4 S5 T23 R14). It is strongly fenced to keep out livestock. It is difficult to enter the pasture, and even more difficult to enter the cemetery and find graves in the tangle of underbrush. In the southern part of the cemetery, near the center, rises an old cedar, probably the oldest tree there. John's grave is at the foot of that tree, facing easterly. A modern ground marker identifies the grave. Nearby, possibly still marked by wooden crosses, are the graves of his son William and two of William's children.

John was born in about 1800 and died in January 1865. He was buried in what was then the cemetery for the old Rocky Mount Church, which oral history reports was a "bower" church. In the 20 years intervening between their deaths Rutha and John were separated by the relocation of the church and the establishment of a new cemetery.

Old Rocky Mount cemetery contains approximately 50 graves, with only a few markers. In a stroke of genius a local resident, John Glasscock, went out to the site in 1980 with longtime resident Jewel Faulkner who pointed out the location of about 16 of the graves and gave the names of those there interred. These have been recorded in an inventory of cemeteries in Chilton County.

## **The Marriage**

So much for getting husband and wife together. Another stumbling block for a researcher relates to John and Rutha's marriage. The obvious place to search is in the courthouse of Cahaba (now Bibb) County, where they were living when they were married. Lack of records there led to the Chilton and Shelby courthouses as well, since it was learned that county lines had been shifting, and there was one county (Baker) that existed for only a few years. Search in the Shelby County courthouse in Columbiana led to the discovery that the "really old" records were housed in the old courthouse down the street, which was a museum/historical society managed by a few volunteers. Another person researching there at the time overheard us asking about marriage records for John and Rutha Thames and we were steered to a record for a John Thomas. This record is identical to that carried by the LDS. But access to the original manuscript revealed that what may appear to be "Thomas" to one can be read as "Thames" by another. And, indeed, it was a record of John Thames receiving a license to marry Ruth Cobb. The county of record was Cahawba. The record should have been available in Bibb County at the courthouse located some 35 miles to the southwest, rather than in the musty vault of this old courthouse. It turned out that the "other person" who hear our query was also a Thames descendant and had been down this route before us. A volunteer referred us back to that crossroads of County Road 51 and the Interstate exit, where we met the genealogical sage of the area in the Glasscock corner grocery. There the whole rear wall was lined with books, papers, computers, a copy machine, etc., and

from the owner came a long oral history of the John and Rutha Thames family, which yielded grandparents, great grandparents and great great grandparents.

### **The Slavery Issue**

John and Rutha Thames were opposed to the idea of holding slaves. However, it is noted that Rutha was given a young man by her brother James Cobb to be trained as a “house” slave. Upon the death of her father she also inherited slaves, which apparently were immediately set free; she apparently would have preferred cash or some commodity from the estate but her siblings and executors decided otherwise. Four of their sons either disagreed with them on the issue of holding slaves, or the Civil War was perhaps about something else. Their four names appear on the March , 1862 muster roll of Captain Charles G. Samuel of Company D, 30th Alabama Volunteers Infantry Regiment. They included John F. (21), Samuel M. (27), James W. (29) and Thomas A. (34). (In their time frame Thomas was a pretty old man at age 34.) They signed up “for three years or the war.” They were originally stationed at Camp Curry near Talladega. It is certain that Thomas served at Vicksburg, and it is likely that the others were there also. This started from a single comment to the effect that it was thought that Thomas A. Thames had served in the Confederate Army, which led to a search in the Archives in Montgomery, with only a name in hand. All of the above facts, and more, turned up as the result of having made the search. In fact, that led to a search in the National Archives which turned up a copy of Thomas’ parole carrying his physical description: 5 ft. 7 in. tall, dark hair and complexion and grey eyes. Since Thomas is in our direct line this was a particularly rewarding and fortuitous outcome of setting to finding out more about him.

### **Serendipity**

Note the characteristics of the above account: dogged field research following an obvious trail; following oftentimes illogical side trails, search through the mails, talking to “locals,” and serendipity: “the faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for [while searching for something else]. Many of you may suddenly be nodding in agreement.

### **Further Research Strategies**

At this point the search of many Thames family members for John’s predecessors and his history prior to arrival in Alabama is at a brick wall. A slight shift allows for tracing Rutha’s family (Cobb) back one more generation, but there is another brick wall. It has been suggested that all of the John Thames in Lee Ponder’s data base might be sorted and the likely subjects be researched further, if possible. A concurrent tack might be to heavily focus research at John’s supposed origins in Mecklenburg County, NC, and those of Rutha’s father, Alexander “Sanders” Cobb, in South Carolina.

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