

## **An African American Farmer And His Wife**

*By Dr. Dan L. Morrill*

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*John Dolphus Connor  
1884-1982*

John Dolphus Connor was a proud, hard-working, God-fearing man. A native of Lincoln County, he purchased a 69.3 acre farm on Beatties Ford Road near the Catawba River on November 9, 1922. The price was \$26 per acre.<sup>1</sup> His wife was Roxie Burton Connor (1887-1964) of Mecklenburg County.<sup>2</sup> In an era when most farmland was owned by whites, John and Roxie Connor succeeded in making their own living from the cotton and other crops they planted and harvested in the fertile soil of the Catawba River Valley. "We got enough," says one of their children.<sup>3</sup> At the time of her death on July 26, 1964, Roxie Connor was survived by seven sons, three daughters, and two step-sons, all of whom grew up on the Connor farm.<sup>4</sup>

John D. Connor (1917 - ) remembers his parents with deepest affection and admiration. "I never heard them swear or utter a profane word." John especially appreciates the high ethical standards his mother and father instilled in their children. "They gave us good hinges," he asserts. His mother, says John, was the "backbone of the family." She cared deeply for her children. She would rise early in the morning to prepare a big breakfast of grits, bacon and eggs and end the day by walking quietly to the bedside of each child, making sure that everything was okey.<sup>5</sup>



*John and Roxie Connor*

John and Roxie Connor were members of Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church. John took care of the church building, which stood just up the hill from the farm.<sup>6</sup> He performed routine repairs and swept out the sanctuary before the Sunday services. As Christians, John and Roxie believed that they should help the needy. John would loan money at no interest to other church members and let them pay it back over extended periods of time. He even persuaded his wife to take in children who otherwise would not have a good home. "He was good-hearted and concerned about others," his eldest son explains.<sup>7</sup>



*Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church*

Life on the Connor farm was challenging but pleasurable. There was a large vegetable garden. John and his sons would labor "making a new ground," meaning that they would prepare the fields yearly for planting. Cotton had to be hauled each fall to the nearby town of Cornelius for ginning. The children worked hard, but they did have time to play. Favorite pastimes included baseball, horseshoes, and hide-and-seek.



*Connor Family, May 1998*



*Connor Family, 1980s*

The boys also enjoyed curling up in discarded automobile tires and rolling across the farmyard, while the girls entertained themselves with games like "Little Sally Walker Sitting In The Saucer." An evergreen tree would be cut each year and decorated for Christmas. Santa Claus usually brought fruits as presents, mostly oranges and apples. The children began their schooling at the Caldwell Rosenwald School, which still stands on Highway 73. <sup>8</sup>



The Connor farm underwent dramatic changes in the early 1960's. Duke Power Company erected the Cowans Ford Dam across the Catawba River; and Lake Norman, North Carolina's largest lake, began to fill up in late 1962 and early 1963.<sup>9</sup> "As Lake Norman fills it will touch off a mammoth scramble for its byproducts," proclaimed the *Charlotte News* on February 25, 1961. Beatties Ford Road, the main road to Charlotte, was inundated with water just north and south of the Connor property, making the farm part of a peninsula. John Dolphus Connor, however, continued to call himself a "farmer." He lived to be ninety-eight years old. He died on October 16, 1982. His death certificate lists his occupation as "farming."<sup>10</sup> John and Roxie are buried side by side in the small cemetery at Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church. Old Beatties Ford Road has been re-named John Connor Road in honor of this enterprising man and his faithful wife.



*The graves of John and Roxie Connor*



*Cemetery at Hunters Chapel United Methodist Church*

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mecklenburg County Deed Book 485, Page 41. Mecklenburg County Certificate of Death 2712. The Certificate of Death states that John Connor's father was Chessemann Connor and that his mother's name was Janie Johnson Connor. His date of birth was May 23, 1884.

<sup>2</sup> Mecklenburg County Certificate of Death 1323. The Certificate of Death states that Roxie Connor's father was John Cathey and that her mother's name was Georgia Burton. Her date of birth was August 25, 1887. Her family believes that her place of birth was Mecklenburg County (Interview of Members of the Connor Family by Dr. Dan L. Morrill, May 4, 1998), hereafter cited as Interview. This writer could find no record that John Connor and Roxie Burton Connor were married in Mecklenburg County. However, they are clearly listed as married on the Certificates of Death. Roxie Connor's obituary article in the *Charlotte Observer* states that among her survivors was a brother, Bert Cathey, who lived in Lincoln County (*Charlotte Observer*, July 28, 1964). It is possible that Roxie Connor, like her husband, began her days in Lincoln County.

<sup>3</sup> Interview.

<sup>4</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, July 28, 1964. The children and step-children of John and Roxie Connor were John Connor, Garfield Connor, Robert Connor, Cheeseman Connor, Louis Connor, James Arthur Connor, Rossie Connor, Dowdard Connor, Josephine Connor Brown, Georgia Connor Torrence, Janie Connor Alexander, Maggie Connor Russell, Joe Connor, and Sherman Burton.

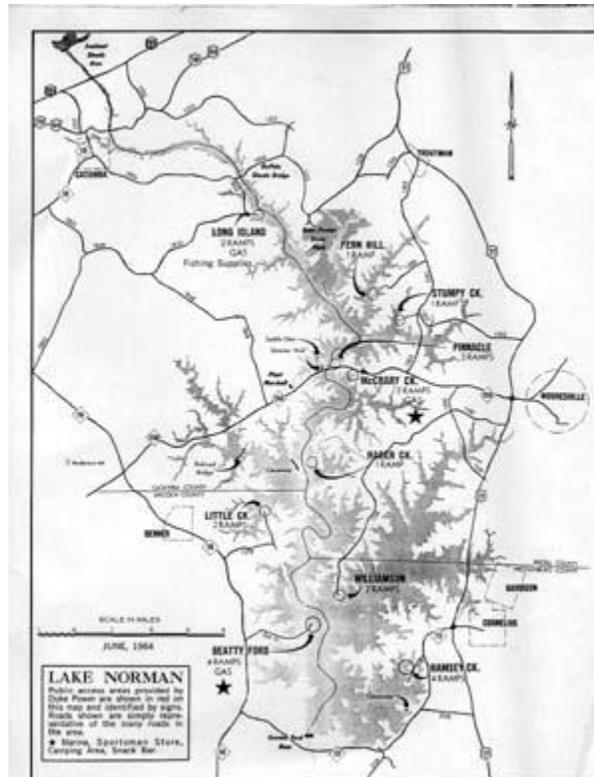
<sup>5</sup> Interview.

<sup>6</sup> The present church building was erected in 1961 to replace an earlier structure.

<sup>7</sup> Interview.

<sup>8</sup> The schools were built with matching funds provided by the Julius Rosenwald foundation, created by the Chicago entrepreneur who directed the booming growth of Sears, Roebuck and Company. From 1917 to 1932 the building program of the Rosenwald Fund helped construct over 5300 black school buildings across the South, 813 of them in North Carolina. Rosenwald not only provided money and architectural assistance to improve school facilities, but also promoted white-black cooperation in the era of Jim Crow. To receive Rosenwald money, the local black community and the local white community both had to contribute funds. [Mecklenburg County built 26 Rosenwald schools](#) between 1918 and 1929. The old Caldwell School was purchased from the School Board in 1953 by T. W. Burgess, and used for many years as a storage building for Burgess Supply Company, the family's building materials business. In 1987 family-member Ben Griffith began restoring the structure as a showroom. He is proud of its past: "My teacher in school told me she used to go here. People in the area have stopped by to say they have old school books from the building. We want to fix it up as much as we can like it was, with a display on its history."

<sup>9</sup> Lake Norman is named for Norman A. Cocke, who was secretary of the Charlotte Electric Company, the Charlotte Power Company, and Piedmont Traction Company as well as vice-president of the Industrial Development Corporation. He was eventually to become president of Duke Power and Chairman of the Board of Duke University.



<sup>10</sup> Mecklenburg County Certificate of Death 2712.