

Following the Path of Sterling Harding

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Introduction

This document traces the life of **Sterling Harding** according to the research that I have found. The spelling of his last name varies depending on the source document. Variations include Sterling, Stirling, Harding, Hardine, Hardin, and Harden. The name Harding is the one that was adopted by my living relatives that I personally know and it is the spelling that I use in general. However it is also documented that one branch of my same family adopted the surname Harden in the late 1800s which they still use today. In this document, I will spell the name as it is written on each document; so it will vary throughout this narrative. Based on the various records, I estimate that Sterling was born around the year **1748**.

Sterling's Whereabouts

I first found a Sterling Hardine listed on the 1771 & 1773 Bute County, NC Census Substitute Indexes (i.e. tax lists). Bute County, which bordered the Virginia counties of Brunswick and Mecklenburg, was created with land split from Granville County, NC in 1764. In 1779, it was split into Franklin and Warren Counties. Therefore Bute County no longer exists today. Sterling's whereabouts in Bute and Granville Counties are as follows according to the indicated documents...

1771 Tax List	Listed as Sterling Hardine	Bute County, NC
1773 Tax List	Listed as Sterling Hardine	Bute County, NC
1784 Tax List	Listed as Sterling Harden	Epping Forest District, Granville County, NC
1786 Tax List	Listed as Stirling Harding	Epping Forest District, Granville County, NC
1790 NC Census	Listed as Sterling Harding	Epping Forest District, Granville County, NC
1800 US Census	Listed as Starling Hardin	Hillsboro District, Granville County, NC
1810 US Census	Listed as Sterling Harding	District Not Specified, Granville County, NC

Sterling's Wives

In 1817, Stirling Harden married **Sally Woods** per the 1760-1957 Granville County Marriage Bonds Abstract list. Note that Sterling Harding had a son also named **Sterling Harding "Jr"** by a previous wife who we will discuss momentarily. I have seen some family trees on Ancestry.com list Sally Woods (sometimes transcribed as **Sally Worls**) as the wife of the younger Sterling; however the younger Sterling married **Charlotte Inscore** a year prior in 1816 and they are documented as still being together on the 1850 census; so he couldn't have married Sally Woods. Therefore Sterling "Sr" must have remarried. I could not find Sterling Sr on an 1820 census so he may have died before it was taken.

We must now figure out the identity of Sterling Sr's previous wife. For that, we turn to the 1802

Granville County Estate File of **Thornton Harding** who I will later establish as the son of Sterling Sr. Thornton Harding and **Elizabeth "Eliza" Harrison** married on February 18, 1801 in Granville County according to the Granville County Marriage Bond Abstracts; and he died one year (or less) later per his estate file. In this file, Sterling Sr and a man named **William Mitchell** (i.e. Sterling's son-in-law) are both accused of stealing property from Thornton's widow upon Thornton's death. The file includes the deposition of a **Charlotte Harrison** who stated "Sterling Harding & his wife came to the house of Thornton Harding dec'd & **Rachel Harding** the wife of Sterling Harding told Eliza Harding [i.e. **Elizabeth Harrison Harding, widow of Thornton**] in the presence of Sterling her [i.e. **Rachel's**] husband that she had come for the bed & I saw Rachel Harding carry off the bed from the house of Thornton Harding dec'd at the same time that they carried away the bed **Rachel Mitchell** [i.e. **daughter of Sterling**] wife of William Mitchell one of the defendants carried away one chair which Eliza Harding the widow of Thornton Harding claimed as her own." Note that Rachel Mitchell's maiden name is given as **Rachel Harden** on her marriage bond to William Mitchell; and I will establish that she was the daughter of Sterling Harding Senior below. This is clearly a property dispute between the Hardings and their in-law Elizabeth Harrison Harding. Also in dispute in the estate file is the plantation belonging to Thornton at which Thornton's widow was living. One of the attorneys asked witness **Rebecca Moore** if she knew "anything of Sterling Harding renting a plantation to his son." Finally Sterling directly states that he was the father of Thornton when he relinquished his rights to Thornton's estate in 1803.

It is my belief that Rachel Harden, wife of Sterling Sr, was born **Rachel Thornton**. In 1753, **Abraham Bledsoe (Sr)** died in Granville County, NC. He listed five of his sons by name and left them money. He also stated that the remainder of his estate should be divided "between the rest of my children" at the death or remarriage of his wife **Sarah**. These unnamed children were likely underage at the time the will was written. We next jump to the 1790 will of **Sarah Rush** (wife of **Benjamin Rush**), located in Franklin County, NC. Her will establishes her as one of Abraham's unnamed children because she named two of her brothers, Moses and Jacob Bledsoe, who Abraham mentioned by name in his will. Abraham also named his "son-in-law **Henry Thornton**" as well as his wife Sarah as co-executors in his will. In Sarah Rush's will, she listed one of her sisters as **Catherine Thornton**. According to the US and International Marriage Records Index, a Catherine Bledsoe did indeed marry a Henry Thornton in 1753. All of this establishes Catherine Bledsoe Thornton as the sister of Sarah Bledsoe Rush.

In the 1808 Granville County estate file of Catherine Thornton, we see a Sterling Harden waiving his rights to administer Catherine's estate. Sterling and Catherine obviously had a connection since he had the initial right to administer her estate. I have found no other children attributed to Catherine Thornton which makes me theorize that Sterling was her son-in-law. If Sterling was Catherine's son-in-law and was the initial executor of her estate because she had no children other than Rachel, this would mean that Sterling's wife was the daughter of Catherine Thornton and her maiden name was therefore **Rachel Thornton**. There's also the obvious clue that Sterling had a son named Thornton Harding.

I do not have an estimated birth date for Sterling's wife Sally Woods who I mentioned earlier; but he was approximately 69 years old by my estimation when they married. I therefore highly doubt that she was the mother of his children.

Sterling's Potential Children

Using various records, I have compiled a list of the individuals who may have been the children of Sterling Harding Sr and Rachel Thornton.

1. **Lydia/Lyddda Harding** married **Hilkiah Crowder** in Granville County on September 16, 1786. Based on Stirling's projected age and the assumption that she was his child, I estimate that she was born before Mollie. I have assigned Lydia a birth year of **1768**.
2. **Mary/Mollie Harding** married **Uel Crowder** in Granville County on June 3, 1789. The 1850 census gives us an approximate birth year of **1769**. If Sterling was her father, it appears that she was born in Bute County since tax records place Stirling there in 1771; and her 1850 census states that she was born in North Carolina. Uel Crowder was also summoned as a witness in the dispute over Thornton's estate. The fact that Lydia and Mollie both married men with the surname Crowder lead me to believe that the women were relatives.

That being said, Lydia and Mollie fall into an age range where they could've been Stirling's much younger sisters, cousins, nieces, or no relation at all. Based on the 11 year time gap between Lydia & Mollie and the individuals I will list below, I lean towards Lydia & Mollie not being Sterling's children; but since Mollie's husband Uel Crowder was called as a witness in Thornton's court case, Mollie and Lydia were likely related to Sterling in some way. There were Hardings living in neighboring Franklin County which was formed in 1779 with land taken from the now defunct Bute County; and the Granville County district in which Sterling lived neighbored the Franklin County district in which the Franklin County Hardings owned land. Due to the proximity of the Granville and Franklin County Hardings, I suspect that Lydia and Mollie were from the Franklin County side of the family.

3. Thornton Harden/Hardin married Elizabeth Harrison on February 18, 1801 per Granville County Marriage Records. I estimate that he was born around **1780**. This fits with the age ranges in Sterling's household on the 1800 census which I will discuss below. Based on his estate file, we know that he died in 1802 and was Sterling's son. Since his first name was Thornton, this also supports the belief that his mother's maiden name was Rachel Thornton.
4. **Nancy Harding**, my 5th great grandmother, can be tied to Sterling in two ways. When charges were brought upon Sterling for the theft of his daughter-in-law's property, a Nancy Harding was summoned in 1802 to testify on his behalf. No testimony from Nancy is included in the file.

Later on in 1811, charges were brought against Nancy and she was thrown in jail after it was reported to local authorities that she had given birth out-of-wedlock. While in jail, she reported that the father of her three children was "**Roger** belonging to **Jesse Garrott**." This implies that Roger was enslaved. I did find an 1809 Bill of Sale showing that Jesse Garrott purchased an enslaved man named Roger from **Nelson Nailing**. If

you view the 1810 census, you will find that Sterling Harding lived two houses down from Jesse Garrott. If Nancy was the daughter of Sterling and lived with him, this gives her physical proximity to Roger. All of these factors lead me to believe that Nancy was the child of Sterling. I will also note that I am a direct male descendant of Roger. I have done a Y-DNA test and my paternal haplogroup is R-L151 which is European; so even though Roger was enslaved, he had a white male ancestor somewhere in his lineage.

When Nancy was charged in 1811, it was specifically due to the birth of her son Solomon Harding who was my 4th great grandfather. Since Nancy was a free woman, her children were born free according to the law and thus began a line of free "mulatto" people in Granville County. Solomon is very traceable in county records. His sisters on the other hand, whom his mother listed as **Elendor** and **Alice/Elsey** in court minutes, have proven to be completely elusive because I cannot find one piece of information about them other than their names as reported by Nancy. Since Solomon was born in 1811 when Nancy was charged and since the girls are also named, this means that either Nancy gave birth to the girls prior to having Solomon (most likely) or her children were triplets (least likely).

As it relates to the Franklin County Hardings having ties to this family as I mentioned above after talking about Mary/Mollie Harding, court documents show that Nancy was ordered to re-appear in court to face a trial and sentencing. A note is scribbled in the margins of a summons stating that Nancy could not be found because she was living in Franklin County. She may have moved in with relatives there for a while in order to avoid the authorities. I have not been able to find additional court minutes regarding what happened to Nancy or Roger. Neither person is mentioned again in the remaining court records of that period.

It appears that Nancy later returned to Granville County and went on to marry a man named **John Chavis** on July 19, 1820 in Granville County according to a marriage bond. Chavis is a well known Free People of Color surname in Granville County. Additionally **Jesse Bass** is listed as a bondsman. Bass is also a well known Free People of Color surname in the same county. Today both surnames are very prevalent in the North Carolina Native American community. This Jesse Bass could've been the same Jesse Bass who was my first cousin, eight times removed on the Bass line from which I also descend.

The Chavis and Bass families were both tri-racial...Native American, black, and white. You will find these families listed as mulatto or "other free." North Carolina forbid black and white marriages in 1715 but there was no ban on white & Native American marriages at the time of Nancy's marriage to John. If John Chavis identified as and was regarded as being "Indian" in his community then he and Nancy would've been permitted to marry. We also know that Nancy already had a relationship and children by an enslaved man; so it is very conceivable that she would have married a person of color.

The last trace of Nancy I could find is the 1840 census in which she was still living in Granville County. She is listed as Nancy Hardin instead of Chavis. This makes me wonder if the marriage between her and John actually occurred or whether they divorced (or he died) and she resumed the use of her maiden name. The 1840 census tells us that she was between the ages of 40-49 at the time. This poses a problem because if we assume that Nancy was 49, this means she would've been born in 1791 and therefore would've been only 11 years old when she was called to testify on her father's behalf in court. This would have been unlikely. We do know that in colonial times people often did not know their true ages or dates of birth as reflected on various census records in which the same person's birth year varies considerably from census to census. I propose that Nancy underestimated her age in 1840 and that she was likely born around **1783**. This would have made her 19 when she was asked to testify in court and 28 when she gave birth to Solomon. This also gives her time to give birth to her two daughters between the ages of 19 and 28. Lastly, if Nancy was born around 1783, it would place her at 17 years old during the 1800 census. Sterling's household has one female between the ages of 16-25 on this census and I believe it was Nancy. I will talk more about this census and tie Nancy's siblings into it below.

5. Rachel Harden married William Mitchell in Granville County on February 18, 1801...the exact same day that Thornton Harden/Hardin married Elizabeth Harrison. Additionally the wife of Sterling Harding Sr was named Rachel. Due to these identical names and marriage dates and the fact that Rachel and her husband are mentioned in Thornton's estate file, I am confident that Rachel Harden was the daughter of Sterling and Rachel Thornton Harding. I estimate that she was born around **1784**. This would put her at the age of 16 when getting married (which was possible with parent permission) and it falls within the 1800 census age ranges.
6. **Priscilla Harden** married Robert Dement on July 6, 1816 in Granville County according to North Carolina Marriage Records. Based on various census records and age reporting, I estimate that she was born around **1790**.
7. Sterling Harden/Hardin "Jr" married Charlotte "Lottie" Inscore in Granville County on January 3, 1816 per North Carolina Marriage Records. I have given him an estimated birth year of **1791**. The 1850 census places them in Granville County living with the following individuals who were young enough to be their children: **Peggy, Tabitha, Elizabeth, William, and Andrew Harding**. The 1860 census documents a Starling Hardin living in Wythe County, VA with Margaret, Tabitha, and Elizabeth. (Note that Peggy is a nickname for Margaret.) The census denotes they were born in North Carolina. Lottie is not in the household so she may have died by then. There is also a William Hardin living in a separate household in Wythe County in 1860. He is of the correct age to be the William listed on the 1850 Granville County census and the 1860 Wythe County census states that he was born in North Carolina as well.

There was also a **John Hardin** living in Granville County in 1850. In 1860, he and some

of the same people in his 1850 household were also living in Wythe County, Virginia; and he is noted as being born in North Carolina. Due to his age, he may have been Sterling Jr's oldest son. The 1850 census is the first one to list all household members by name. John married **Mariah Haley** on January 5, 1840 in Granville County and was living with her in 1850. This would explain why he was not listed in Sterling Jr's 1850 household. Also living with John and Mariah were **Martha, John, Adaline, Mary, Louisa, and Doctor Hardin**...all less than ten years old and thus were probably their children. A death certificate and marriage record for **Samuel H. Hardin** reflect that he was born in 1851. Both documents list his parents as John and Maria Harden.

On December 24, 1863 John married again, this time to Louisa E. Shewey who was roughly 23 years younger than him. Based on the 1880 census, their children were **Missouri, Thomas, Anna, and Maria Harden**. Additionally there is a birth record for a **Susan V. Harden** who was born in 1875 with John and Louisa listed as her parents. She does not appear on the 1880 census so she may have died young. The Virginia Birth Register also shows the birth of **Stephen Harden** on June 24, 1884. His parents are listed as John and Louisa Harden. It does not appear that Stephen ever married because he is listed as single in 1930 and 1940 and was living with his brother Thomas on both census records.

The 1800 Census

The 1800 census is important in connecting Thornton, Nancy, Rachel, Priscilla, and Sterling Jr as the children of Sterling Harding Sr and Rachel Thornton. Names are only given for the head of household but it does tell us the age ranges and genders for everyone else in the home. If we eliminate Mary and Lydia as possible children of Sterling Sr as I proposed above and if I have estimated everyone else's ages correctly as described above, the remaining potential children of Sterling and Rachel fit into the census as follows using the indicated household data...

Gender	Age Bracket	Number in Home	Suspected Identity
Male	Under 10	1	Sterling Jr
Male	16-25	1	Thornton
Male	45 and over	1	Sterling Harden Sr
Female	10-15	2	Rachel & Priscilla
Female	16-25	1	Nancy
Female	45 and over	1	Rachel Thornton Harden
Enslaved		1	
Number of Household Members		8	

Summary

Sterling Harding Sr is documented as living in Bute County, NC which bordered Brunswick and Mecklenburg Counties in Virginia. (This is important to note because it is believed that the Hardings migrated down from Brunswick County.) Sterling then moved to Granville County, NC. He married at least twice...first to Rachel Thornton then to Sally Woods. I believe he had family in neighboring Franklin County, NC and I suspect that his children were Thornton, Nancy, Rachel, Priscilla, and Sterling Jr. This concludes my analysis of Sterling Harding Sr's family unit. I welcome any input you may have.