



The Guion Network: Enslaved Families of New Bern, North Carolina

A Reparative Genealogy Report on the Enslaved and Descendant Families of New Bern, North Carolina

Introduction

The Guion family of New Bern, Craven County, stood at the center of an urban network joining law, commerce, and slavery. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they bought, sold, and inherited human beings whose names and labor sustained New Bern's prosperity. This report reconstructs the lives of men, women, and children—recorded in wills, deeds, and probate files—to trace their paths to freedom after 1865. The work forms part of **Reparative Genealogy's** mission to restore visibility to families erased by enslavement and to connect their descendants with documented truth.

The World of New Bern

Unlike the vast plantations of the coastal plain, New Bern was a commercial port and political hub. Enslaved people there cooked, built, rowed, cleaned, and nursed in townhouses and small workshops. They were hired out, mortgaged, and sometimes allowed to earn wages that their owners then seized. Within that world, the Guions—physicians, merchants, and lawyers—maintained an estate intertwined with other powerful families: Manly, Haywood, Williams, Pugh, and Stanly.

Documents spanning 1786 to 1842 show how this urban elite used enslaved people not only for labor but as instruments of credit and kinship. Names such as **Shadrack**, **Dinah**, **Rose**, and **Boston** appear in early deeds of gift and sale. By the 1830s, trust deeds show dozens pledged as collateral—evidence of both wealth and debt. Through each transaction, the same pattern emerges: family members transferring people among themselves, keeping kin networks intact on paper even as they fractured real families in practice.

Lives Named and Remembered

The 1842 probate inventory of **John W. Guion**¹ is the richest surviving record of this network. It lists more than forty people, grouped in family clusters that reveal relationships often hidden in such documents.

¹ Craven County, North Carolina, Superior County Court, Guardians and Administrators Accounts 1839-1845, pp.781-782, 1842, "Craven, North Carolina, United States records," images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C9TS-3PGK?view=explore>: Oct 23, 2025), image 115 of 568; Image Group Number: 007672720

Nanny, aged 59, appears with her adult daughter, Louisa, and Louisa's children, **Charles** (seven months) and **Owen** (five). Nearby are Nanny's sons **Ben** (20) and **Moses** (11). In a few lines, the inventory preserves three generations—a grandmother, her children, and grandchildren—living together on the Guion property.

Another cluster includes **Eliza** (26) and her children, **Harriet** (3) and **Cisero** (5); and **Sukey** (40) with seven named children—**Jane**, **Hetty**, **Watts**, **Hannah**, **Adaline**, **Julia**, and a baby **Charles**. Unlike many inventories that list only sex and age, this document acknowledges mothers and children surviving within captivity.

Alongside them stand elder laborers—**George**, **Frank**, **Ned**, **Joe**, **Jesse**—men whose long years of service had reduced their appraised value but whose endurance carried memory across generations. At the bottom of the list is **Hannah**, aged 71 and valued at \$0—a chilling reminder of how human worth was once measured.

Linkages Through Time

After emancipation, fragments of these families surface in the 1870 and 1880 census. **Edward Guion**, a 93-year-old gardener in New Bern Ward 5, may be the same man once listed as “Ned (54)” in 1842.² **Frank Guion**, 85 in 1870 and 91 in 1880, likely represents one of the two Franks from the inventory.³ **Lovier (Lovey) Guion** and **Matilda** raise children of mixed heritage under the same roof as a white watchman—a glimpse of racial complexity born from coercion.⁴

A man named **Moses Guyon** appears in Bladen County⁵, blind yet working as a railroad pump laborer. His age and birthplace match those of the child “Moses (11)” from Nanny's line, suggesting a life carried forward despite the loss of sight. Such continuities—of names, trades, and family patterns—transform a ledger of property into a lineage of survivors.

Urban Enslavement and Its Aftermath

² 1870 U.S. Federal Census (Population Schedule), New Bern Ward 5, Craven County, North Carolina, p. 5, Dwelling 66 Family 74, James White household; digital image, “1870 United States Federal Census,” Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), accessed September 2025.

³ 1870 U.S. Federal Census (Population Schedule), Township 3, Craven County, North Carolina, p. 5, Dwelling 39 Family 39, Francis Guion household; digital image, “1870 United States Federal Census,” Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), accessed September 2025.

⁴ 1870 U.S. Federal Census (Population Schedule), New Bern Ward 4 Township, Craven County, North Carolina, p. 7, Dwelling 51 Family 58, Lovier Guion household; digital image, “1870 United States Federal Census,” Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), accessed September 2025.

⁵ 1870 U.S. Federal Census (Population Schedule), Bladenboro, Bladen, North Carolina, p. 3, Dwelling 16 Family 16, Moses Guion household; digital image, “1870 United States Federal Census,” Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>), accessed September 2025.



New Bern's system of urban slavery created proximity and exposure. Enslaved people lived in attics, back rooms, and alleys beside their owners. They gained skills, literacy, and access to information that would later sustain Reconstruction communities—but proximity also meant surveillance and exploitation. The 1870 households showing mulatto children with the Guion surname echo these unspoken histories.

By the late nineteenth century, descendants of enslaving families like the Guions re-entered public life as lawyers, editors, and politicians, shaping the Jim Crow order. The continuity of white power stood in painful contrast to the precarious lives of the freed people whose labor had built that very society.

Patterns of Kinship and Survival

The records reveal not random lists but **family systems under pressure**. Nanny's line shows matrilineal strength: daughters and grandsons clustered together. Sukey's seven children suggest a mother's insistence on naming and preserving each life. Eliza's small family, with its repeating names of Harriet and Cisero, provides clear anchors for post-war tracing.

The reappearance of distinctive given names—**Cisero, Watts, Scipio**—in Reconstruction-era sources strengthens the likelihood that many survived Emancipation. Each name becomes a starting point for deeper research into cohabitation records, Freedmen's Bureau labor contracts, and Freedman's Bank registers, where parents are sometimes named outright. Through such linkages, the enslaved regain individuality, and their descendants can re-enter the American story as subjects rather than property.

Freedom and Continuity

The passage from slavery to freedom was uneven and incomplete, yet the Guion-connected families built a community from what they had. In New Bern, freed people established schools, churches, and mutual-aid societies. The appearance of the Guion and Guyon surnames in church rolls and labor contracts reflects a determination to claim identity publicly.

For many, literacy and skilled trades—gardening, carpentry, seamstress work—became tools of autonomy. Elders such as Frank and Ned lived long enough to witness freedom, carrying memory into a new generation. Children named in bondage grew to adulthood under Reconstruction's brief promise, leaving descendants who still live in eastern North Carolina today.

Legacy and Reparative Genealogy

Reparative Genealogy's purpose is not simply to record the past but to mend its fractures. The Guion research demonstrates how careful archival study can restore dignity to those who were



systematically erased. Each recovered name—Nanny, Sukey, Eliza—becomes a door through which descendants may walk, connecting family memory with documentary truth.

This work also exposes the continuity between slavery and modern inequality. The same families who held people in bondage often re-emerged as civic leaders shaping segregation. By identifying those linkages, genealogical research becomes a form of historical accountability. It reminds institutions and heirs alike that repair begins with recognition.

Within New Bern’s story lie both loss and resilience: the loss of kin through sale, the strength of families who refused to forget one another. Through deeds, wills, and census pages, their voices echo. Reparative Genealogy seeks to carry those voices forward—into classrooms, archives, and living rooms where descendants can reclaim their narratives.

Conclusion

The Guion Network report transforms scattered legal papers into a collective biography of survival. It reveals how enslaved families navigated urban bondage, endured, and emerged from emancipation to shape the modern South. Their histories remind us that freedom was not a gift but an inheritance earned through endurance.

Reparative Genealogy continues this work by linking evidence to humanity—by naming, mapping, and restoring lineage where silence once stood. The goal is not only to prove descent but to honor it: to reconnect families and restore legacy.

Digitally signed and verified by Kellie M. Farrish.

Founder & Principal Genealogist, Reparative Genealogy®

All citations conform to Elizabeth Shown Mills, Evidence Explained, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2023).
