

Carl Goerch, in his 1956 book, *Ocracoke*, has a chapter titled “Died Before He Was Born.” In his book Goerch relates the story of visiting the old George Howard cemetery on British Cemetery Road to take a look at the grave of Warren O. Wahab. Right there on the tombstone he reads the inscription: Born Sept. 10, 1855; Died September 14, 1842.

According to his grave stone, Warren Wahab died almost thirteen years before he was born!

According to Goerch’s way of thinking, the mainland stonecutter was probably careless and cut the stone wrong. Even though Warren’s family surely noticed the mistake, he muses, it would have been costly and inconvenient to return the marker to Washington or New Bern. As weeks, then months, and finally years, passed the family never got around to replacing the stone. A century and a half later the “mistake” still intrigues islanders and visitors. In fact Warren O. Wahab’s grave has become something of a tourist attraction on Ocracoke Island.

More than thirty years ago I went to the cemetery to look carefully at the graves. Warren’s parents, Job (1802-1860) and Eliza Bradley Howard Wahab (1808-1870), are buried there. Eliza was the great-granddaughter of William Howard, Sr., colonial owner of Ocracoke Island. Job and Eliza were the parents of fifteen children.

Job & Eliza Wahab Graves:

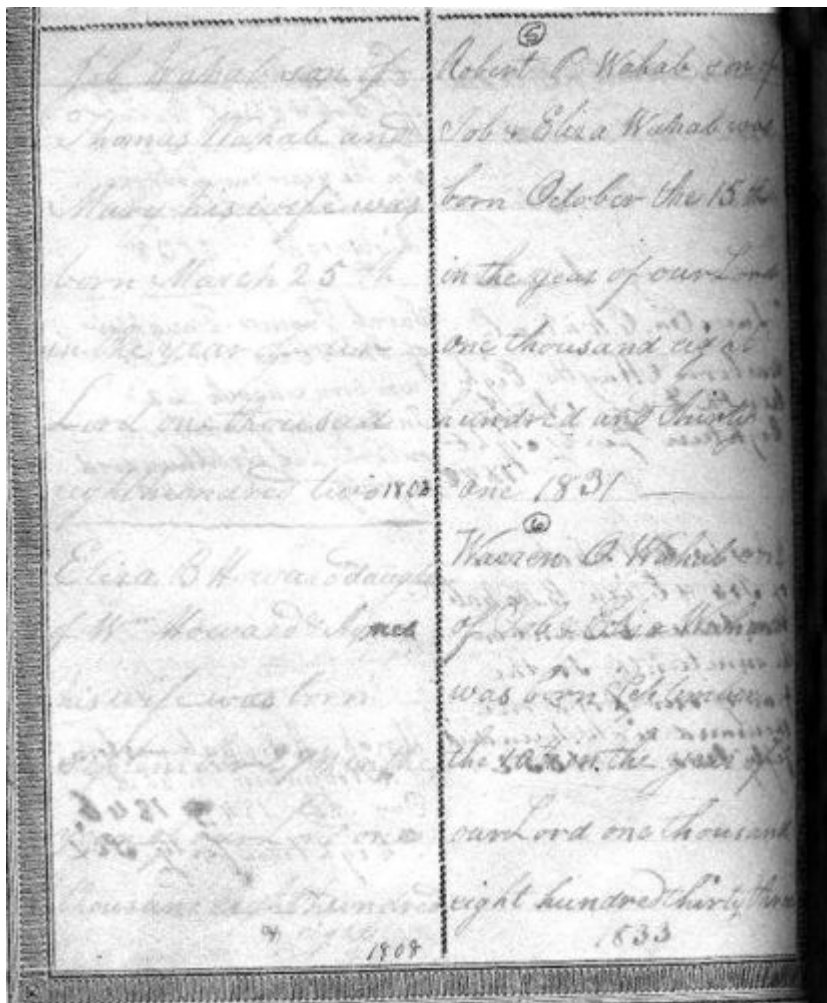


Three of the Wahab children died within days of each other. No one alive knows why they died, though the cause of death was probably a childhood disease, maybe whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, or some equally terrible scourge of the nineteenth century. How tragic for Eliza and Job to lose three children within the span of less than two weeks.

The children are buried close to the lane, beside their parents. Of course, none of the children died before they were born, and their tombstones do not indicate such. Job (March 3, 1835 — September 4, 1842) was seven and a half years old when he died. Jonathan (born July 14, 1826) was 16 years old. He died seven days after Job, on September 11, 1842. Warren died on September 14, just a few days after his ninth birthday. He was born September 10, 1833 (not 1855).

Carl Goerch and numerous others have been misled. The stonecutter made no mistake. The confusion arises simply because the "3s" on Warren's grave stone have weathered to look like "5s." Careful inspection of Job's marker reveals the similarities, and differences, between the 3 and the 5. Perusal of the family Bible and comparison to the birth date (1833) on Warren's marker confirms the correct birth date.

A Page from the Wahab Family Bible:



(Photo courtesy of Neilson W. Wahab. Wahab information is in lower right hand corner.)

Jonathan Wahab Grave:



Sacred to the Memory of
Jonathan Wahab
July 14, 1826 - Sept. 11, 1842
*Why mourning parents grieve for me
Who made with you so short a stay.
Perhaps our heavenly Father saw
Some threatenng evil on the way.*

Job B. Wahab Grave:



*Sacred to the Memory of
Job B. Wahab
March 3, 1835 - Sept. 4, 1842
This tender bud so young and fair
Call'd hence by early doom.
Just came to show how sweet a flower
In Paradise would bloom.*

Warren O. Wahab Grave:



*Sacred to the Memory of
Warren O. Wahab
Sept. 10, 1833 - Sept. 14, 1842
These ashes poor
This little dust,
Our Father's care shall keep;
Till the last angel rise and break
The long and dreary sleep.*

Jonathan, Job, and Warren Wahab were only three of many Ocracoke Island children and infants who died in the nineteenth century. Ocracoke, like many rural communities of the time, was often without professional medical care. Retired country doctors occasionally settled on the island “for a time,” but their skills, medicines, and remedies were limited. When no doctor was in residence (and that was most of the time) midwives tended to the

sick and injured as they were able. Health care, for the most part however, fell to parents. Home remedies were the norm, and they were often inadequate to combat many childhood diseases including pneumonia, croup, congestion, consumption (tuberculosis), paralysis (polio), infections, diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, and mumps.

For example, tragedy struck the home of Joseph (1834-1907) and Elizabeth (1838-1883) O'Neal in 1860. On the same day of that year three year old Alexander O'Neal and his one year old sister Josephine both died of typhoid fever.

Zilphia (1841-1919) and James (1839-1904) Howard had twelve children. Eight died in infancy. Although there are only four headstones in their Howard Street cemetery (see photo below), close examination of the graves reveals different inscriptions on each side of the markers. Two footstones accompany each headstone. All eight children died between 1865 and 1884. The youngest was one month old; the oldest, six years. The parents' grief must have been unspeakable.

Zilphia & James Howard Children's Graves:



Florence Howard
Jan. 25, 1864 - Sept. 10, 1865

“Asleep in Jesus”

William W. Howard
Mar. 26, 1862 - July 14, 1868
“Asleep in Jesus”

Edith Howard
Oct. 30, 1872 - July 16, 1873
“Asleep in Jesus”

Cordelia Howard
July 16, 1876 - Aug. 16, 1876
“Asleep in Jesus”

Stacey W. Howard
Aug. 13, 1877 - Dec. 18, 1878
“Asleep in Jesus”

Annie G. Howard
Jan. 25, 1879 - Dec. 22, 1880
“Asleep in Jesus”

Thomas R. Howard
Jan 18, 1882 - Oct. 3, 1882
“Asleep in Jesus”

Elsie M. Howard
July 21, 1883 - Dec. 25, 1884
“Asleep in Jesus”

In the far corner of the graveyard lies one more child who succumbed to an early death:

Elsie Simpson Grave:



Elsie W. Simpson
Nov. 7, 1910 - Jan 15, 1911
"Safe in the Arms of Jesus"

James and Zilphia had four children who survived to adulthood:

Lorena (b. 1866) and her husband Rev. Lawrence Olin Wyche (b. 1852) had three children, all of whom survived.

Homer (b. 1868) and his wife Aliph (b. 1876) had thirteen children, but only seven lived past the age of twenty-one.

Sabra (b. 1870) and her husband Daniel Tolson (b. 1867) had six children; one died young..

James Wheeler (b. 1874) and his wife Tressie (b. 1876) had seven children; five lived to see their twenty-first birthday.

Walk through various Howard Street cemeteries and you will see the following graves, among others:

Evans Howard Grave:



Evans Howard
Oct. 26, 1905 - Jan. 21, 1923
"Beloved One Farewell"

Failing Howard Grave:



Failing H. [Howard]
Son of H[omer] & Aliph Howard
Nov. 4, 1899 - July 14, 1900
"Budded on Earth to Bloom in Heaven"

Everette & Elcia Howard Graves:



Everette R. Howard
Dec. 18, 1916 - Apr. 24, 1924
"From Mother's Arms to the Arms of Jesus"

Elcia O. Howard
Jan. 16, 1919 - Jan. 19, 1919
"From Mother's Arms to the Arms of Jesus"

James and Zilphia Howard were my great grandparents. Homer and Aliph Howard were my grandparents. Neighbors on Howard Street remembered hearing my grandfather singing and/or playing his fiddle as he walked or rode his horse down the sandy lane, often late in the afternoon. Sometimes he sang happy, uplifting songs; at other times sad and mournful tunes suited his mood. Having confronted so many family childhood deaths, there is little wonder at his sometimes melancholy feelings.

One melody, typical of the sentimental Victorian parlor ballads that were popular in his day, that my grandfather often sang was "Put My Little Shoes Away" (written in 1873 by Samuel Mitchell and Charles E. Pratt).

Put My Little Shoes Away

Mother dear, come bathe my forehead
For I'm growing very weak
Let one drop of water, Mother
Fall upon my burning cheek
Tell my loving little Schoolmates

That I never more will play
Give them all my toys, Mother
Put my little shoes away!
I am going to leave you, Mother

So remember what I say
Do it, won't you please, dear Mother?
Put my little shoes away!
Santa Claus, he gave them to me
With a lot of other things

And I think he brought an angel
With a pair of golden wings
Then I, too, shall be an angel
By, perhaps, another day
So will you, then, dear Mother

Put my little shoes away?
Soon the baby will grow larger
And they will fit his little feet
And he will be nice and cunning
As he walks upon the street!

I am tired now, dear Mother
So remember what I say
Do it, won't you please, dear Mother?
Put my little shoes away!