

The struggles of a tenant farmer

PROVIDED BY NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL RESOURCES / OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

As you read...

This was a copy of a chattel mortgage, signed by Jessa Buttler. In this document, Butler conveyed property to Charles Miller in exchange for a loan. In signing this document, Butler contracted to repay the loan, with interest. If he failed, Miller would take ownership of the property pledged by Butler.

As you read, try to answer the following questions.

THE MORTGAGE

1. How much money did Butler owe Charles Miller?
2. What items of personal property did he convey to Charles Miller?
3. When did Butler have to repay his debt to prevent Charles Miller from selling his personal property?
4. When did Butler sign this contract? How much time did he have to earn the money to pay off the debt?

THE ACCOUNTS

1. Notice that in addition to having to pay back the principal, or original amount, of \$88.20, Mr. Butler is also being charged \$9.92 in interest after one year. This brings the total amount owed up to \$95.12. How much was he able to pay off on Feb. 26, 1884? (Hint: Look for the line that says "Paid on bond.")
2. Because he was unable to pay off the full amount owed, what do you think happened to the personal property that Mr. Butler conveyed to Mr. Miller in the chattel mortgage?
3. Mr. Butler presumably paid \$30.41 on February 26, 1884, leaving a debt of \$64.71. How much interest was he charged on that debt between February 26, 1884, and Oct. 26, 1890?
4. With the addition of \$7 in witness fees and the deduction of 18 cents for surplus money left over when Mr. Butler paid off a different, \$50 debt, Mr. Butler now owes Mr. Miller \$106.04. If he were to pay off his debt immediately, how much money would he actually have spent to pay back the original amount of \$88.20? To find this answer, take the answer to question #1 (showing how much Mr. Butler paid in Feb. 1884) and add it to the \$106.04 that he owes as of Oct. 26, 1890.
5. Do you think Mr. Butler would be able to pay off this debt in the next year? Why or why not?

When crops were sold in the fall of each year, tenant farmers hoped to have enough money to pay landowners the rent for the house they lived in and the land they farmed and to pay merchants for food they had bought on credit during the year. Sharecroppers hoped to pay

landowners for rent of a house and land as well as for farming supplies and tools; they also hoped to pay local merchants for the food they had bought during the year.

Often the crops did not bring in enough money, and the tenants and sharecroppers went into debt. One way they could continue farming was to sign chattel mortgages, in which they promised to pay back the money they owed. In this contract they conveyed certain items of personal property to the person to whom they owed money. (To convey means to transfer the title or ownership of an item to another person.) If they paid their debt, these items would not be sold. But if they failed to pay their debt, the mortgage allowed the person to whom money was owed to sell the conveyed items to pay off the debt.

The W. R. Miller Papers at the State Archives contain many examples of chattel mortgages. Some of these mortgages state that the debtor is a cropper or tenant farmer of C. R. Miller, a landowner in Orange County.

A chattel mortgage

The chattel mortgage reprinted here contains many misspellings but is reprinted as it was written, with some editorial corrections for clarity. The farmer, Jessa Buttler (also spelled as Jessy Butler in another document), apparently was unable to read or write and had to sign this mortgage with an X, representing his mark. It is unclear who wrote the document for him.

I Jessa Buttler of the county of Orang in the state of NC am indebit to Chs R. Miller of orang conty in sade state on the sum of eighty eight dollars and twenty cts for which he holds my note to be due on the 15 day of October 1883 and to secure the payment of the same I do hearby convey to him these articles of personel property to wit my gray horse Charles... 8 years olde and blind and my intire crop of corne wheat oats tobacco shuck foder straw.... I am to farm on Chs R Miller lands...

but on the spec[j]al trust that if I file to pay sade debit and intrest in or before the 15 day October 1883 then he may sell said property or so much thereof as may be ne[ces]sary by public auction for cash first giving twnty days notis at three public places and aply the proceeds of such sales to the discharge of saide debit and intrest on the same and pay any surplus to me giving under my hand and seal this 3 day of March 1883.

Witness: J. W. Miller
My Mark: X Jessa Buttler

An accounting of debts

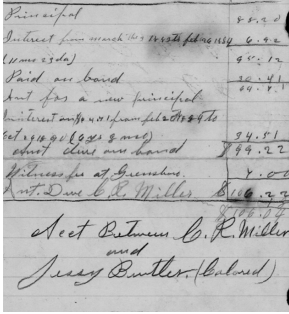


Figure 1. Copy of document showing how much money Jessy Butler owed C. R. Miller, from the W. R. Miller Papers, North Carolina State Archives. The original (click to enlarge) shows that Mr. Butler was African American.

Another document reflects Mr. Butler’s attempts to pay off his debt. This document, reproduced below, shows the principal of the debt, the interest that was added to the debt, and how much money Mr. Butler owed as of October 26, 1890.

Principal	88.20
Interest from march the 3 1883 to feb. 26 1884 (11 mo 23 da)	6.92
	95.12
Paid on bond	30.41
Amt for new principal	64.71
Interest on \$64.71 from feb. 26 1884 to Oct. 26 1890 (6 yrs 8 mo)	34.51
Amt due on bond.	\$99.22
Witness fee at Greensboro	7.00
Amt. Due C. R. Miller	\$106.22
[Surplus money credited to Mr. Butler after he paid back a different debt]	0.18
	\$106.04

On the web

Simple interest

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4416>

In this lesson for grade seven, students learn how to calculate simple interest, and research careers in which people need to understand simple interest.

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Copy of document showing how much money Jessy Butler owed C. R. Miller, from the W. R. Miller Papers, North Carolina State Archives. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.