

James McElreath (1802-1886) and Rachel Dowdy (1810-1898)
Prepared by Dr. Michael M. Black (mmblack1 [at] outlook.com)

January 12, 2026

<https://blog.valdosta.edu/mmblack/family-history-and-genealogy/>

OPENING

Today is January 12, 2026. In this episode, I will examine the life of James McElreath and his wife Rachel Dowdy. Researched, written, and narrated by Michael M. Black and dedicated to my son Matthew M. Black. Matthew, this couple is your 5th great-grandparents. They lived most of their lives Gwinnett County, Lumpkin County, Hall County, and Barrow County, Georgia and a short stay in Alabama. You can find your line of descent in my Family Tree Maker program.

EARLY LIFE

PARENTAGE OF JAMES MCELREATH

James McElreath was born December 19, 1802 in Spartanburg District, South Carolina. He was the 4th of 10 children born to Michael McElwreath and his wife Jencie Carson. The last name has many different spellings in the records but the accepted version for our family line is McElreath. It was probably more correctly McIlwraith. His parents were immigrants from Ireland who arrived in Spartanburg after the revolutionary war. There was a significant number of Scots-Irish Presbyterians fleeing economic hardship and religious conflict in Ulster who arrived in the 1770s to Charleston. Michael McElwreath appears in numerous records in Spartanburg Co SC including being listed as an adjoining owner in 1801 which supports James's birthplace as Spartanburg District. James's 1863 discharge for disability also provides his birthplace as Spartanburg District, South Carolina.

PARENTAGE OF RACHEL DOWDY

His future wife, Rachel Dowdy, was born June 5, 1810 in Moore County, NC. She was 1 of 13 children born to Amos Dowdy and his wife Effie Carleton. I do not have the birth years for all their children so I do not know the precise birth order, but Rachel would have been one of the older children. Her mother's maiden surname Carleton is also reported as Carrollton. Some researchers have assigned her mother's name as Euphemia, which may or may not be correct. Her father appears in the 1810 Moore Co NC census which supports Rachel's birth location at Moore Co NC. The Dowdy family relocated to Hall Co GA by 1820 where they appear in the census. This was a substantial move for the Moore family, over 300 miles. Settlers were drawn into Georgia for fertile land for cotton farming.

MARRIAGE

I have not been able to find a marriage record for James McElreath and Rachel Dowdy but based on where they were living at the time and when their first child was born, they married 1831 in Hall County, GA. Rachel is still listed in her father's household in the 1830 Hall Co GA census which also supports 831. The death certificate for two of their children Martin and Margaret confirm their mother's maiden surname as Rachel Dowdy.

FAMILY

James and Rachel raised their family in Hall, Lumpkin, and Gwinnett County. There were at least 8 children born between 1832-1849 including:

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1. Narcissus Elizabeth McElreath, called Elizabeth
2. Thomas K. McElreath
3. Charles Lee Andrew McElreath, called Charlie
4. Martha Jane McElreath
5. Martin van Buren McElreath
6. Margaret C. McElreath
7. William R. McElreath, called Billy
8. Sarah M. McElreath, called Sallie

1830s

In July 1830, "James McElreath" was listed as having a letter at the post office in Gainesville (Hall Co).

Although I do not have his service record, James McElreath served in Bearden's Co. of the 2nd Ga. Mounted Volunteers during the Indian War of 1837. James Dowdy, a relative of Rachel Dowdy, also served in this regiment. This was better known as the Second Seminole War (or Florida War) which was a conflict from 1835-1842 but James was probably fighting against the Creek Indians in Georgia.

1840s-1850s

During the 1830s-1850s, many families from Georgia immigrated to Alabama in search of a better life. James and Rachel McElreath did this. Interestingly, James McElreath was enumerated in both the 1840 Campbell County, GA census and the 1840 Cherokee County, AL census so they may have moved during summer of 1840. The "James McElwreath" in Campbell County was living adjacent to his father, Michael McElwreath, our immigrant ancestor. In his book, Walter McElreath (1867-1951), a McElreath family historian and prominent attorney, stated James left home as a young man and was not heard from again. We know this is incorrect because there are other records which place him near family members. I'm not sure which family member initially reported this misinformation.

1840 Cherokee County, AL – Household of James McElreath

Jas. McElrath 2 males aged 5-10
 1 male age 30-40
 2 females under 5
 1 female age 5-10
 1 female age 10-15
 1 female age 20-30

By the 1840 census, there would have been 4 children in the James McElreath household so these other children may be younger siblings of either James or Rachel (Martin's parents). The James McElreath family was back in Georgia by 1844 when daughter Margaret C. McElreath

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was born. The 1850 Forsyth Co GA census confirms that Martin was born in Alabama. Later census records will erroneously report him as born in Georgia.

1850 Forsyth County, GA, 31st District

Ja ^s M ^c Elwrath	45	M	Farmer	SC	cannot read or write
Rachel	" 38	F		NC	cannot read or write
Narcissa E	" 17	F		Geo	
Thomas K	" 16	M	Farmer	Geo	
Charles C L	" 15	M	Farmer	"	
Martha J	" 10	F		"	
Martin V B	" 9	M		Ala	
Margaret C	" 7	F		Geo	
William R	" 4	M		"	
Sarah M	" 10/12	F		"	

By 1858, they were living in Lumpkin County as evidenced by his appearance in the tax registers there.

1860s

I have been unable to find the James McElreath family in the 1860 census. They would have been in Lumpkin Co.

WAR

Now we move into an extremely difficult time period in the history of the United States, the onset of the Civil War. I hope one day you will research more about this conflict using reputable sources to understand both sides. Through your father's line, me, you have 9 confederate patriots. Through your mother's line, Krystle, you have 15 confederate patriots for a total of 24.

The following information is taken from the compiled service record for James McElreath, a private in Company C of the 52nd Georgia Infantry. Interestingly, his sons Martin and Charlie also served in this same company.

- 04 Mar 1862. Enlisted at Dahlonega, Ga by Capt. Asbury for 3 years
- 13 Apr 1862. Appears on a pay roll of the organization named above, showing payment of bounty. Bounty due: \$50. Paid \$50. Received payment: James M^cElreath
- Jul. 1862. Sick: diarrhea
- 31 Dec 1862. Appears on company muster roll of the organization named above for Aug 31 to Dec 31, 1862. Present or absent: Present

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- Feb. 1863. Appears on company muster roll of the organization named above for Jan'y + Feby 1863. Present or absent: Present
- 20 Feb. 1863. Certificate of Disability for Discharge. Sixty one years of age, five feet, six inches high, dark complexion, black eyes, dark hair, and by occupation when enlisted, a farmer. During the last two months said soldier has been unfit for duty 60 days. Station: Vicksburg, Miss.
- 08 Apr 1863. Sick: fever
- 3 March 1863. Discharged old age due to rheumatism of the back and hip and the infirmities of age...
- 03 March 1863. Final pay at discharge \$49.97

This regiment continued active war service until May 23, 1865, but there are no further records of James's service past his discharge. He signed the Reconstruction Oath in Lumpkin County in 1867. The oath was required in order for any man in the south to vote.

1870s

August 3, 1870 Census

Lumpkin County, Georgia

McElreath, James, 68, M, W, farmer, real estate 125, personal value 100, South Carolina

-----, Rachel, 60, F, W, keeping house, North Carolina

-----, William, 22, M, W, farm laborer, GA

-----, Sarah, 20, F, W, no occupation, GA

1880s

June 17, 1880 Census

Gwinnett County, Georgia, 316th district

McElreath, James, W, M, 78, farmer

-----, Rachel, W, F, 69, wife, keeping house

-----, William, W, M, 32, son, works on farm

-----, Sarah, W, F, 29, daughter, works on farm

-----, Lou E., W, F, 4, granddaughter¹

-----, Emaline, W, F, 3, granddaughter

¹ Lou Ellen and Emmaline "Emily" were daughters of James Cantrell and Sarah McElreath.

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In the agricultural census taken at the same time (June 17, 1880), James McElreath had 28 acres of tilled land and 100 acres of woodland/forest. The estimate value of all farm productions for the year 1879 was \$200.

James McElreath died July 16, 1886 and is buried at Bethabra Baptist Church outside of Winder, GA on SR211. One of my pet peeves in family research is when middle names are attributed to ancestors who never had middle names. This is the case for James McElreath who is sometimes given the middle name Michael, but if you examine all the records existing during his lifetime, the middle initial M never appears.

1890s

On Nov. 18, 1892, Rachel McElreath, widow, applied for pension for her husband's service in the Indian Wars, specifically in Bearden's Co. Ga. Vols. I have not ordered the full record to see what it states but plan to do so.

Rachel Dowdy died June 2, 1898 and is buried next to her husband at Bethabra Baptist Church. Rachel's marker inscription: Gone but not forgotten.

CLOSING

I hope you have enjoyed this episode about the lives of James and Rachel McElreath, my 4th great-grandparents. I will continue my research on this couple, and if I find additional and substantive information, I will append it to this recording.

RESOURCES

1810 FC Moore Co NC (hh Amos Dowdy)
1820 FC Hall Co GA (hh Amos Dowdy)
1830 FC Hall Co GA (hh Amos Dowdy)
1840 FC Campbell Co GA (hh James McElwreath)
1840 FC Cherokee Co AL (hh Jas. McElrath)
1850 FC Forsyth Co GA (hh Ja^s M^cElwrath)
1870 FC Lumpkin Co GA (hh James McElreath)
1880 FC Gwinnett Co GA (hh James McElreath)
1880 Gwinnett Co GA agricultural census (hh James McElreath)
Compiled Service Cards: M^cElreath, James
Death certificate: Martin V M^cElreath, 1930
Death certificate: Mrs S C McElreath Brown, 1942
Index to Indian Wars Pension Files, 1892-1926: McElreath, Rachel, widow, 1892
McElreath, Walter, Me and My Folks, 1941
Return of Qualified Voters and Reconstruction Oaths, Lumpkin Co GA, dated 08/06/1867

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S.C. Dept. of Archives and History, Plat for 1000 acres in Spartanburgh District, dated 12/18/1801, with Michael McElwrath as adjacent

The Athenian, Tuesday, July 20, 1830, page 1

Tombstone: James McElreath, 1886

Tombstone: Rachel McElreath, 1898