

Reconstructing the Harwood–Gilbert–Fisk Family Network of Norfolk County, Virginia (1799–1862)

Introduction

Reconstructing family relationships in early nineteenth-century Norfolk County, Virginia, is complicated by sparse probate documentation, inconsistent identification of women, and reliance on marriage bonds rather than explicit kinship statements. These challenges are particularly acute when tracing daughters, whose identities often appear under multiple surnames across their lifetimes.

This study examines the parentage of Eliza Fisk Harwood (1827–1888), Evelina Harwood Nash (1822–1858), and Susan Gilbert Harwood Woodhouse (ca. 1820–1845), evaluating whether they were daughters of John Robbins Harwood (ca. 1785–1831) and his wife, Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood (1791–1862), married in Norfolk County in 1811. It further reassesses the role of Martin Fisk and introduces additional evidence connecting the Nash, Woodhouse, and Harwood families through marriage bonds and surety relationships.

Historical Context and Methodology

Norfolk County records of this period exhibit several limitations:

- inconsistent recording of female maiden names
- reliance on marriage bonds and sureties
- limited probate evidence naming daughters
- frequent use of kin-based child placement practices

To overcome these gaps, this study applies the Genealogical Proof Standard, emphasizing correlation of independent sources, including manuscript collections, compiled family records, and marriage bond evidence.¹

The Harwood Family in Published Record

A foundational framework for the Harwood family appears in *The Belles of Williamsburg: The Courtship Correspondence of Eliza Fisk Harwood and Tristram Lowther Skinner*, which identifies the children of John Robbins Harwood and Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood, including:

- Evelina Harwood Nash (1822–1858)
- Susan Gilbert Harwood Woodhouse (ca. 1820–1845)

and other siblings born between 1811 and 1830.² While compiled, this source reflects internal family knowledge preserved through correspondence and provides a critical evidentiary starting point.

Direct Evidence of Parentage: Eliza Fisk Harwood

More conclusive evidence is found in the *Skinner Family Papers*, which explicitly describe Eliza Fisk Harwood as:

“a younger daughter of the eleven children of John and Susan Harwood.”³

This statement constitutes direct evidence of parentage and places Eliza within the same sibling group as Evelina and Susan.

Kinship Placement and the Fisk–Galt Connection

The same manuscript source explains that Eliza Fisk Harwood was “given” as an infant to her mother’s niece, Mary Ann Galt, reflecting a documented Southern kinship practice.³

Mary Ann Galt, née Fisk, was the daughter of Martin Fisk and Elizabeth (Gilbert) Fisk.⁴ This establishes a clear kinship chain:

- Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood
- Elizabeth (Gilbert) Fisk
- Mary Ann (Fisk) Galt

This relationship explains Eliza’s upbringing in the Fisk–Galt household and confirms that the Harwood and Fisk families were closely connected through the maternal Gilbert line.

Marriage Bond Evidence Linking Harwood, Nash, and Woodhouse Families

The following evidence significantly strengthens the reconstruction of this family network.

Evelina Harwood and Joseph Nash

The marriage of Evelina Harwood and Joseph Nash occurred on 17 October 1842 in Norfolk, Virginia, as recorded in *Virginia, U.S., Select Marriages, 1785–1940* and Norfolk court records.⁵ This establishes Evelina firmly within the Norfolk marriage network associated with the Harwood family.

Joseph Nash as Security for Susan Harwood’s Marriage

Abstracts from *Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds (1797–1850) and Other Genealogical Data* provide critical corroboration. In the 7 May 1840 marriage of James Woodhouse and Susan Gilbert, Joseph Nash appears as **security**, and the bride is explicitly identified as:

“daughter of Susan H. Harwood.”⁶

This record is particularly significant for two reasons:

1. It provides **direct evidence of Susan’s parentage**.
2. It places **Joseph Nash in a close legal and social role within the same family network prior to his own marriage to Evelina Harwood**.

Correlation of Kinship Network

The appearance of Joseph Nash as security in Susan Harwood’s marriage, followed by his marriage to Evelina Harwood two years later, is unlikely to be coincidental. Instead, it reflects a pattern typical of kinship-based marriage networks in early Virginia communities.

This linkage is further supported by the *Skinner Family Papers*, which situate these individuals within the same extended family context.

Together, these records demonstrate:

- shared participation in marriage bonds
- repeated association within a defined social network
- alignment with documented sibling relationships

Earlier Fisk–Gilbert Connection

The marriage of Martin Fisk and Elizabeth Gilbert in 1799 establishes the Fisk–Gilbert connection prior to the Harwood marriage.⁷ This earlier linkage explains the later integration of Fisk descendants into Harwood family life and reinforces the conclusion that these families formed a continuous kinship network across generations.

Identity Correlation: Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood

Multiple records refer to Susan under variant names:

- Susanna H. Gilbert (1811 marriage bond)⁸
- Susan H. Harwood (identified in 1840 marriage record)⁶
- Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood (published family account)²

These references align in chronology, geography, and familial association, with no conflicting individuals identified. They are therefore treated as a single individual.

Sibling Group Reconstruction

The combined evidence supports the inclusion of the following daughters of John and Susan Harwood:

- Susan Gilbert Harwood Woodhouse
 - directly identified as daughter of Susan H. Harwood⁶
- Evelina Harwood Nash
 - linked through both compiled record and marriage network evidence²⁵
- Eliza Fisk Harwood
 - explicitly identified in manuscript sources³

These individuals are united by direct statements, kinship placement, and participation in the same marriage network.

Martin Fisk's Role

The cumulative evidence demonstrates that Martin Fisk was not merely a legal surety but a member of the maternal extended family. His marriage into the Gilbert family, the placement of Eliza within his daughter's household, and the continued association of his descendants with the Harwood family establish his role as a close relative, most plausibly an uncle by marriage.

Conclusion

The convergence of manuscript evidence, published family materials, and marriage bond records supports a coherent reconstruction of the Harwood–Gilbert–Fisk family network.

Eliza Fisk Harwood, Evelina Harwood Nash, and Susan Gilbert Harwood Woodhouse were daughters of John Robbins Harwood and Susan Hollands (Gilbert) Harwood of Norfolk County, Virginia. The Fisk and Galt families formed part of the maternal kinship network, and Eliza’s upbringing within that household reflects a documented familial arrangement.

The additional evidence of Joseph Nash’s role as security in Susan Harwood’s marriage, followed by his marriage to Evelina Harwood, provides a critical linkage that strengthens the overall proof and demonstrates the interconnected nature of this family network.

This conclusion rests on multiple independent and converging lines of evidence and satisfies the Genealogical Proof Standard.

Notes

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry, 2019).
2. Mary Mallard, ed., *The Belles of Williamsburg: The Courtship Correspondence of Eliza Fisk Harwood and Tristram Lowther Skinner, 1839–1849* (Williamsburg, Va.: [publisher], [year]), [pages].
3. *Skinner Family Papers*, [repository], [collection details].
4. Virginia marriage records, Martin Fisk and Elizabeth Gilbert, 1799; compiled in *Virginia Marriages, 1700–1799*.
5. *Virginia, U.S., Select Marriages, 1785–1940*, p. 117; “Norfolk, Virginia, United States records,” image 822 of 999; Norfolk (Va.) Clerk of the Corporation Court.
6. *Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds (1797–1850) and Other Genealogical Data*, 157; entry for James Woodhouse and Susan Gilbert, 7 May 1840.
7. *Virginia Marriages, 1700–1799*, entry for Martin Fisk and Elizabeth Gilbert (1799).
8. Norfolk County, Virginia, Marriage Bonds, John R. Harwood and Susanna H. Gilbert, 1 February 1811.