

UNsung HERO OF WILKES COUNTY - WILLIAM JAMES WILLIS

Well-grounded in the Word, Willis is one of the Greatest Generation

By REV. ED ANDERSON

Distinguished African American mortician and funeral home director William James Willis was born April 30, 1924, in Tignall, Georgia to the late Reverend James Walter "Son" Willis (1896-1973) and Mrs. Minnie Lee Andrews Willis (1900-1971). His paternal grandparents were Andrew Jackson (1870-1918) and Lula Bell Hill Willis (1873-1949) of Tignall. His paternal great grandparents were Albert (1834-1919) and Ann Willis (1836-1926) of Tignall, Georgia. His maternal grandparents were William and Kathryn Cade Andrews of Tignall. He has been united in holy matrimony to Dorothy Sprowl Willis for 62 years and they are the parents of three wonderful and successful children.

In naming their children, they followed an old tradition in the black community which has its history in the African tradition of naming a newborn child after one of the elders in the community who is/was loved and respected by the parents of the newborn baby. Their oldest child, William James "Jimmy" Willis, Jr. (married to Joyce Harding Willis) is named after his father. William James was originally named Willie James, but officially changed his name while in high school.

Their second child, Minnie Ruth Willis Marsh (married to Hubert Andrew Marsh) bears the first name of her paternal grandmother and the middle name of her maternal grandmother. Their third child, Mary Lee Willis Suttles (married to Dony Suttles) bears the first name of her maternal grandmother and the middle name of her paternal grandmother.

William James and Dorothy Sprowl Willis are the proud grandparents of seven grandchildren, Willis H. Marsh, Hubert Andrew (Andy) Marsh, Jr. (married to Frances), Joycelyn Y. Willis, Juanita E. Willis (married to Craig Hicks), Darryl Tinson, Derrick Tinson, and Daniel Tinson. They are the proud great grandparents of William L. Hicks and Andrea Electa Marsh.

With a father who was a farmer and a Baptist preacher and a mother who was a school teacher, Willie James and his younger siblings, Jo-

nas, Marion, and Geri, each day began and ended with fervent family prayer in the Willis household. After breakfast and chores, it was off to school. Usually, the children attended the one- or two-room rural schools where their mother taught school. This enabled her to parent, inspire, teach, and monitor them throughout the day.

She had William James accompany his ailing grandmother Kathryn Cade to Dalton, Georgia, when he was a young teenager. An avid learner, he liked Dalton and the educational opportunities it provided. In Wilkes County, black students had a different school year than the white students. School for black students began in October, after they and their parents had picked all the cotton. In Dalton, he was able to begin school around Labor Day and complete the same full school year as the white kids. His middle and high schools in Dalton were segregated in the 1930s and 40s.

It would be difficult for Rev. "Son" Willis, the "walking preacher," to do without his oldest son's help on the family farm on Delhi Road, but God gave him and his wife the desire to see that their children had a better opportunity in life than they had. Reluctantly, they listened to their son's request to be allowed to remain in Dalton and attend school.

They were aware that there were limited educational opportunities past the sixth grade, one- and two-room schools for young African American students in Wilkes County. In Dalton, William James could be assured of the opportunity to finish high school. His parents understood the importance of getting a good education. He assured them that he would not let them down. He would work hard, pray hard, and write home regularly. They made the decision to give him the opportunity to succeed.

William James did not disappoint his parents. Throughout his life he has been grateful to them and to God for the opportunity he was provided.



Pictured from left to right are Lula Mae Parker, Oree Dee Willis, Geri Pero, Porter Bee Jones, and Cora Willis Andrews. Seated at the head of the table is William James Willis.

He would return to Wilkes County each summer to help his parents on the farm and to serve as an apprentice/intern at T. A. McLendon's Funeral Home.

One of his first school acquaintances in Dalton was an intelligent and wonderful young lady who sat behind him in his middle school classroom. Her name was Dorothy Sprowl. A friendship that began in their early teen years later evolved into a courtship, then marriage that has produced beautiful children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, a beautiful and loving home, an enduring and profitable family business, respect and standing in the church, community, county, and state, and in his profession. On his many return trips from Wilkes County during his teenage years, he would often speak to Dorothy with enthusiasm and passion about his desire to be a part of the funeral home industry.

In the pre-civil rights and Jim Crow era, William James had already discovered his calling. While opportunities were limited and social and economic conditions for blacks in Georgia and throughout the south were challenging, he had a clear

vision of the future. For indeed, his home training, religious and secular education, and educated and God-fearing parents and grandparents gave him a strong self-concept and the confidence that "he could do all things through Christ who strengthens him."

Well-grounded in the Word of God, William James had accepted Christ at an early age at Pole Branch Baptist Church under the pastorate of Rev. Earl McLendon. He had seen the hand of God at work in his own life, and in the lives of his Godly parents, grandparents, great grandparents, fellow church members, and members of the community. He understood that he had a Godly heritage and that he was expected to work hard, study hard, pray hard, be humble and respectful, and do unto others as he would have them do unto him. He understood that the torch was being passed to him and his generation from the patriarch and matriarch of the African American branch of the Willis family in Georgia, Deacon Albert Willis and his wife Ann Willis down through his grandparents, Deacon Andrew Jackson and Lula Bell Hill Willis; on down through his parents, Rev.

James Walter and Minnie Lee Andrews Willis.

The Willis family patriarch, Albert Willis, had been born in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1834 during that awful time in the



WILLIAM JAMES WILLIS

history of the United States when human beings bought and sold and enslaved other human beings based on the color of their skin. When Albert was eleven, his mother and four(?) siblings were sold to different plantation owners in other states. Young Albert was sold to wealthy Wilkes County plantation owner, James Henry Willis.

A so-called mulatto, which means that one of his parents was white, young Albert required medical attention, no doubt, because of mental and physical aspects of his ordeal. He was assigned duties as a house servant on the Willis Plantation. During that time, it was discovered that this young man, who was born in the vicinity of Monticello, Virginia, had the same wood carving talent and skills as Eston Hemings, the son of Sallie Hemings and Thomas Jefferson of Monticello. A mantle he carved somewhere between 1845 and 1919 is still a point of pride at "Great Oaks," the old Willis Plantation on Delhi Road. During Wilkes County's 2009 Fall Ramble sponsored by the Georgia Trust, many citizens and students of history marveled at this great work of art.

Albert Willis became the trusted "man servant" of James Henry Willis. In 1860, then 26-year-old Albert went with 41-year-old James Henry Willis and the Delhi Rangers off to the Battle of Bull Run or the Battle of Manassas in Virginia. Still enslaved, his job was to ensure that food and clean clothing were available to James Henry. When James Henry became ill, Albert took him to the Confederate Army Dispensary in, of all places, Charlottesville, Virginia, and helped to provide medical care for him.

Later that year, upon his medical discharge, Albert helped James Henry return to "Great Oaks" where both men had wives and children awaiting their return. The Willis family oral history tells us that the deep loyalty Albert had for James Henry was because of a blood relationship. What is known is that after

the war ended the two men and their families continued to live in close proximity to each other in peace and harmony and their descendants still do so to this day.

We also know that after the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution, Albert and his family became the benefactors of land for their personal farming use and for the building of a family church, Trinity Baptist Church, which has stood as a beacon of light in the Delhi Community since 1880.

(continued next week)

Council retreat ...

(continued from page 1A)

two, and in 2003 the council made the charter and the ordinances consistent, and in 2004 the legislature approved it. At the time, Fleming said, Mayor Burns went along with the change.

Fleming then went on to give an extensive description of the laws controlling how cities can change their governmental structure. He compared the process by which city employees are hired now, and how they would be hired under the strong-mayor form.

The proposal would be a hybrid between a traditional "professional" form of city government and a strong-mayor form, he said. "For a city your size and as complicated as it is, it's good to have a city administrator, but the package I've presented of making a stronger mayor is very common."

Fleming showed a chart of things that a city could do under home rule and the things that would require legislative action. He recommended the city go the legislative route to make any changes to the powers of the council and mayor.

The proposed changes, Fleming said, could include changes by which the mayor would gain in four possible ways. He would get veto power, be able to nominate major officials, have appeal power over dismissals, and approval power over hiring. The attorney described all of the gains in detail, including which the council could override.

If they want to go ahead with the strong-mayor proposal, Fleming said, the council needs to instruct him that they approve of this proposal, and he would go about "the much bigger task of making sure the charter, the ordinances, and the personnel manual all reflect these changes properly. We would draft it, and then you would go about the process of enacting the changes."

In the discussion that followed, Councilman Tutt took strong exception to *The News-Reporter's* coverage of the city council meeting, saying it failed to mention his opposition to any overly strong leader. "I clearly stated, but the paper failed to put my quote in, that I do not want one man having all the power. I clearly said I hate dictatorships. I want the power to come through this council."

After some two hours of discussion, the council also heard from David Jenkins on the Southwest Washington Redevelopment Plan and plans for an Enterprise Zone. The council delayed a response by Tourism Director Ashley Barnett for funding to help keep the Visitors' Center open on The Square. The Service Delivery Strategy put the burden for funding on the county and the PDA's special fund. Mayor Burns said that they would reconsider in May after they see the county's proposed funding.



Solemn observances at Kettle Creek Battlefield commemorate the sacrifices of Revolutionary War patriots.

Weekend's solemn observances will commemorate sacrifices

By KIP BURKE
news editor

Although the Revolutionary Days celebration next weekend will include a parade, living history experiences, and a battle skirmish, the heart and soul of the weekend will be three solemn observances to commemorate the sacrifices of the Revolutionary War patriots, organizers say.

Saturday's highlight will be the pageantry during the Battleground Memorial Ceremony, starting at 2 p.m. at the War Hill Monument. Patriotic music, wreath presentations, and musket volleys will honor the memory of the Patriots. "Come and help us remember our Patriot ancestors and their sacrifices, and feel proud to be an American," said Bobby Towns, past Georgia Society SAR president and coordinator of the Memorial Ceremony.

For the third year, a Colonial worship service, led by the Georgia Society SAR Chaplaincy Corps, will be conducted during the Revolutionary Days observance. Hosted by the First Baptist Church in Washington, many attendees will worship in Colonial attire. The brief service starts at 9 a.m. to allow everyone to participate without interfering with their own local worship services.

Georgia Society SAR Chaplain

Dan Gates said, "We are a nation founded on faith in God. In commemorating the events of Kettle Creek, it is fitting that we gather like the people of Wilkes County did on the Sunday after the battle in 1779 to pray and remember the fallen. On February 14, we will do the same in their memory."

In addition to the Revolutionary Days activities in Washington, the Elijah Clark State Park near Lincolnton will be the site of a Memorial Service on Sunday, February 14, at 11 a.m. The ceremony, conducted at the gravesites of Elijah and Hannah Clarke, honors the memory of Elijah Clarke, John Dooley, and other "Heroes of the Hornet's Nest."

After the Battle of Kettle Creek, the Wilkes County Militia continued the fight for Independence in northeast Georgia and the western Carolinas. Elijah Clark State Park encompasses the homestead where John Dooley lived with his wife and children and where in 1780, he was killed by vengeful Loyalists. The park is one of the eight sites on Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail.

Sponsors of the Ceremony at Elijah Clark State Park include the Georgia Society Sons of the American Revolution, Elijah Clark State Park, Washington-Wilkes SAR Chapter and Elijah Clarke DAR Chapter in Athens.



Rev. Joseph Hurley will be installed as pastor of the Siloam Missionary Baptist Church, Union Point, Sunday, February 7, 3 p.m. Family and friends are invited to attend this occasion.

The Housing Authority of the City of Washington board of directors will meet Thursday, February 11, at 5 p.m.

Christ City of Prayer Church will have a singles seminar, "Living, Saved, and Single," a life of singleness, salvation, and sacrifice, February 6, 4 p.m. at the church. Refreshments will be served. Married couples are welcome.

The Lincoln-Wilkes Retired Educators Association (LWREA) will meet Thursday, February 11, 11 a.m., at the Mary Willis Library, Washington. All retired educators are invited to attend.

Lyonsville Baptist Church will ordain Clifford Hanson and Frank Williams to the board of deacons February 7, 3 p.m.

Hilliard Station Baptist Church will have a black history program on Sunday, February 21, 11:45 a.m. The speaker will be Rev. Willie Crew of Washington.

New Saints CME Church, 515 Baltimore Road, Washington, will hold this month's SNAP meetings on Saturday, February 13, and February 20, at 10 a.m.

Registration dates for the Washington-Wilkes Pre-Kindergarten program have been announced and are as follows: Monday through Thursday, March 1-4, 8 a.m.-4 p.m., and Friday, March 5, 8 a.m. to 12 noon, at the Roy Burns Senior

Citizens Center, 108 Marshall Street, Washington. If you have questions call Patricia D. Wilder, coordinator, at 706-678-7678, or 706-401-9975.

The Lincolnton First Baptist Church will have a black history gala celebration centering around history that has been made in Lincoln County, the first black mayor, Mayor Henry Brown, February 21, 2 p.m. with Mayor Willie Burns of Washington as the speaker. The public is invited.

Lyonsville Baptist Church will have its annual black history program February 14, 3 p.m. Rev. Michael Gresham and the Reeves Chapel Baptist Church choir and family will be special guests.

The Wilkes County Young Farmer Equipment Auction will be held Saturday, March 20, 10 a.m., at the McGill-Woodruff Ag. Center on U.S. Hwy 78 By-Pass, Washington. Buy or sell. For information call Eric Holton at 706-678-4044 day, 706-285-2863 night. Auctioneers will be Eddie Christian GAL #1672; and Leslie Smith GAL #3391.



Mahlori Waller opens 'Tangles' salon

Surrounded by family, friends, and fellow business owners, hairdresser Mahlori Waller cuts the ceremonial ribbon to officially open her new business. Washington Wilkes Chamber of Commerce board members welcomed the new businesswoman to the Chamber. Her former employer, Paula Walker, said she was thrilled that Waller had been able to open her own business. "You'll never forget this day, and I'm so happy for you." Tangles is located on Spring Street at the late Kermit Hocutt's former shop.