



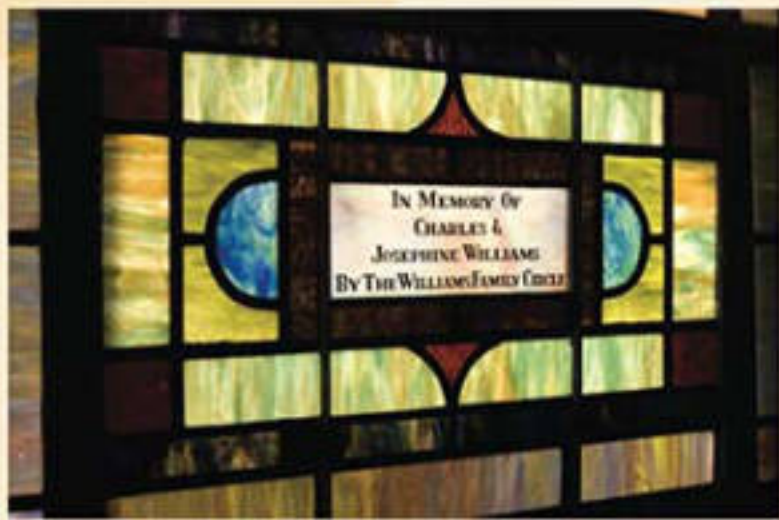
SERIOUS ABOUT FAMILY

*Will the circle be unbroken?
Just ask anyone in the Williams family,
and the answer is a resounding "yes."*

BY LYDIA GIBSON

Top left, right: New Hope Missionary Baptist Church stands on land donated by the Williams family in 1870.

Right: An album published in 1995 to commemorate the 100th family reunion features photos and details about the children of Josephine Williams.



"THE ORIGINAL 10"
CHILDREN OF CHARLES & JOSEPHINE WILLIAMS

and Josephine are standing in order of age: Matthew, and Stella

This picture gathered at their sister Maggie and brother-in-law [unclear] of Keppring in 1918. The tradition has continued to 1982.

PARTIAL SCHOOL RECORDS OF THE "ORIGINAL 10"

Register of Public School in District No. 10, County of Johnston, N.C. - 1918

TERM 1918-1919

BOOKS USED: Webster's Spelling Book, National Arithmetic, Reading by [unclear]

NAME OF PUPIL	AGE	SEX	DATE OF BIRTH	DATE OF ENTRY	DATE OF DEPARTURE	REMARKS
Charles Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Josephine Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Matthew Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Stella Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Maggie Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
John Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
William Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Elizabeth Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Thomas Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
James Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Henry Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
George Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Frank Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Robert Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Charles Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Josephine Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Matthew Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Stella Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Maggie Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
John Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
William Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Elizabeth Williams	10	F	1888	1918	1919	
Thomas Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
James Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Henry Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
George Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Frank Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	
Robert Williams	10	M	1888	1918	1919	

PHOTOS BY CHARLES BROWN

On a Saturday afternoon a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving, close to 50 people swamp the living room of Carolyn Hatchett's Chatham County ranch house. Packed couches give way to folding chairs, which line the walls and spill into their kitchen, all the way back to the dishwasher. On the other side of a pair of French doors, children are raising a giddy ruckus in the parlor. Meanwhile, adults' rapt faces peer toward Cloyce Lassiter, president of the Williams Family Circle. With her hands raised at the center of the living room, she is trying to call to order the monthly committee meeting of near and distant relatives.

"I think it's time we got started," Lassiter says. Already, the assembly of aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents — some of whom have flown in from as far away as Texas, Georgia, or Chicago, Illinois — have prayed together and sung three rousing verses of "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand," a family tradition that dates back a century. Wearing identical T-shirts that read, "As long as there's Earth, there's a Williams family," they've given

thanks for each other, for good health, plentiful children, happy lives, the strength to rise up every morning, and the food they will eat together later this day.

As she always does, 92-year-old Stella Alston asks the group to sing "Down at the Cross," and, as always, Lassiter indulges her — but only, she insists, one verse. After the chorus, when Alston marches resolutely into the second verse, the room dissolves into uproarious laughter. Alston sings on. Still giggling, the others join in.

"All right, all right," Lassiter says at last, feigning sternness and trying not to smile. "Let's have the minutes from the last meeting."

40 acres and a mule

For the Williams Family Circle, an ever-widening collection of kin that stretches from one ocean to the other, family is serious business. Nowhere is that truer than here in northeastern Chatham County, where, beginning with a part-Indian, part-African slave girl named Mountain, Williams descendents have owned and worked the same 40-some acres of farmland and forest for seven generations (eight, if you count the latest crop of grandchildren).

Just down the road from Hatchett's ranch house stands New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, for which Williams ancestors gave much of the money and all of the land to build back in 1870. Across the street, the family cemetery amasses an impressive gathering of forebears: farmers, blacksmiths, entrepreneurs, church deacons, and Sunday school teachers. Mountain is there, too, under a tombstone that reads, "Beginning of the Williams family."

"This place is what I call 'Corporate,'" says 35-year-old Mona Long, who grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. "This is home; it's headquarters — for everybody."

The property Mountain bequeathed to her descendents offers a profound emotional — not to mention physical — grounding, and it occupies enormous space in the family psyche. Williams scions tend the land's history as carefully as they do its fields. "At the end of slavery, every slave was supposed to get 40 acres and a mule," says Lassiter, who's served as the family's president since 1976. "Well, this is the 40 acres. The mule died."

She points to a whitewashed



Cloyce Lassiter, president of the Williams Family Circle, stands near the monument to family founder Mountain Williams.



COURTESY OF CLYDE WILLIAMS / PHOTOS BY RONALD B. MITCHELL

wooden lean-to her two great-uncles, Math and Tommy Williams, erected at the cemetery's edge more than half a century ago to give themselves a toolshed and a shady place to sit and contemplate. The two men are buried a few feet away. "Standing out here is like having a conversation with the dead," Lassiter says. "The memory is here. It's always here."

Coming home

Every spring, the Williams clan returns and remembers. Since 1895, Williams descendants have celebrated Mother's Day weekend with a family reunion on their ancestral property. More than 300 relatives throng to Chatham County from every corner of the country and check into Durham's Sheraton Hotel.

Meticulously planned, the weekend's itinerary rarely wavers: Registration is held Friday night; Saturday morning, everyone pulls weeds and trims the hedges at the family cemetery. A fish fry is on Saturday afternoon and a family golf tournament the next day. On Sunday morning, they swarm the pews of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, and that evening they tuck in one final repast.

This May, they'll gather for the 111th Williams Family Circle reunion.

"At the reunions, we put a lot of emphasis on the children," Hatchett says. "If you came here and didn't know where you were, you'd think you were at a carnival. We have ponies, trampolines, moonwalks, face-painting,

clowns — everything." Each year, the family's youngsters are charged with designing the reunion T-shirt.

"It's about making the kids want to come, getting them interested in being around family," says 65-year-old Faydean Richardson. "I grew up in the reunion; that's all I know. We want it to be like that for the kids, too."

By all accounts, it is. "Every time there's a family reunion, I get really excited," says 10-year-old Jada Lillie. Her cousin Brittnee Kelly, 12, chimes, "We get to see everybody, and we get to eat and eat! I have so many cousins, and we're always like, 'Can we stay just one more day?'"

Mountain's folks

The reunions began with Mountain's grandchildren 22 years after her death. A pretty girl who was skilled at baking, Mountain belonged to plantation owner George Williams, whose son, John, took her as his mistress. She bore him seven children, whom he taught to read. One of them was a comely blue-eyed daughter named Josephine.

If Mountain was the Williams family's mother, Josephine was its matriarch. A woman who hewed close to the Gospel, she was a deft administrator of home and family. Her children worked hard in school, and trail-weary ministers could always count on her open door and generous table.

In 1866, Josephine helped organize a weekly gathering of worshipers under

Family reunions continue to be a time for togetherness with a lot of emphasis on the children.

a local brush arbor. A few years later, that congregation built New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, on property donated by Josephine's sister Caroline. Since then, Williams progeny have stood in New Hope's pulpit, its meeting rooms and fellowship hall, and at its Sunday school blackboard. They've filled its sanctuary, recited wedding vows, and occupied funeral caskets.

"A lot of people end up right back here," says Long. "One way or another."

"At one time, everybody that went to New Hope Church was related to me," says Clyde Williams, whose childhood driveway led to the family cemetery. Now living in Illinois, he was raised in a house that stood on the site of Josephine's home, which burned to the ground in 1928. "A hundred people sitting in the church every Sunday. We were all somehow connected."

Today, Josephine's great-grandchildren talk about her as if they knew her. She is at once comfortably familiar and utterly remote, almost a mythological figure. Growing up, Williams children hear much of Josephine's honest piety and fierce determination, and succeeding generations have yielded enough namesakes to make reunions confusing. "I hate it to death that we never knew her," says Richards. "But in a way, I



His Advantage

Cadet Wheatley discovered Hargrave on his road to the U.S. Naval Academy. He knows that U.S. service academies maintain some of the highest standards for college admittance. At graduation 2005, Hargrave qualified six students for U.S. service academies.

Hargrave is proud of these emerging young leaders, but we are equally proud of all Hargrave graduates. During the last three years, Hargrave has placed 100% of its students into an institute of higher learning.

Hargrave is college prep.

800/432-2480
www.hargrave.edu

Grades 7-12 & PG; 11:1 Student/Teacher ratio;
Summer School; How to Study; Christian Values;
Leadership; Study Hall; Scouting; Venturing
and USA Swimming.

feel like we did. All of us think about her plenty. That's for sure."

The "Original 10"

Josephine died in 1894, leaving behind 10 children, ranging in age from 25 to three months. The following May, those who'd married and moved off the farm came back, food in hand, to visit their sister Magnora. She had remained at home with her new husband to look after some of the younger siblings. (Magnora's older sister Mary adopted the baby, Veora, and nursed her as her own child.) The next spring, the siblings — later nicknamed the "Original 10" — gathered again, and again the year after that. By the time the 20th century broke the horizon, the Williams family reunion was becoming a tradition.

The way Veora's youngest daughter sees things, bare survival propelled those first few reunions, establishing an urgency that keeps the family close more than 100 years later. "It started with Grandma dying when she did and Grandfather dying when my mother was three," says 74-year-old Janet Kennell. "They all had to rely on each other to make it. I mean, the reunions got started because the ones who had moved into the city had to come back down to help do the spring clearing and planting."

The family doesn't do much clearing or planting these days, and Williamses have scattered into a maze of new surnames. "But if any of us are down," Lassiter says, "there's help. If I'm in trouble, I don't have to stay in trouble. I can get help from the family and come out of it and make a life for myself. That's how it's always been. You don't even have to ask." Over the years, more than one relative has needed — and gotten — a rescue from despair or disaster or a turn of bad luck.

"We just keep loving and keep talking," says Julia Alston. "We don't lose track of each other."

By the book

In recent decades, the Williams Family Circle has become as much an organization as it is a family. Relatives pay dues. The clan's North Carolinian

members divide up into committees and meet monthly to plan and execute yearly reunions and family vacations, to write and disseminate newsletters and announcements, to research family history and track down old records.

In 1995, the family published a 196-page album to commemorate its 100th reunion, for which then-President Bill Clinton, then-Governor Jim Hunt, and the Chatham County board of commissioners sent letters of congratulation. A copy of Mountain's 1873 will opens the book, along with a plantation ledger recording the births of Josephine and her siblings. A report card gives some of the Original 10 good marks in spelling, arithmetic, grammar, and North Carolina history for the fourth period of the 1883 school year. Among the album's abundance of photographs are labeled head shots of nearly every Williams descendant and detailed biographies of Mountain, Josephine, the Original 10, and many others. At the back, behind 40 pages of paid ads, an extensive family tree stretches out across five pages. A masthead near the front names an editor-in-chief, a historian, a photographer, and a staff of consultants.

Since last fall, Lassiter and a new editorial staff have been working on a supplement to the 1995 album, another 196-page volume aimed at bringing readers up to the present. It was one of the agenda items for the November committee meeting, alongside a "Kidz Club" fundraiser, a plan to clear cemetery land, and a "sick report" on the family's ailing and indigent.

"We need to get going on this now," Lassiter says. "We're going to need everybody's help."

"We get together like this every month," Kennell says after everyone has adjourned to the kitchen for a potluck feast of chicken, ham, greens, casseroles, beans, and turkey. The excited chatter in Hatchett's house is rising to a din. "Usually we have from 25 people on up at meetings," she adds. "And we always act like we haven't seen each other in years." ↪

Freelance writer Lydia Gibson currently lives in Chicago, Illinois.