

# The Jordan Williams Family

## A BRIEF HISTORY

**J**ORDAN D. WILLIAMS was born in 1794 in the Abbeville District of South Carolina, the son of James Williams (born about 1764 in Wales) and Mary Clark. Abbeville County is in the southwest corner of the state, close to its border with Georgia. Jordan spent his youth there and served in the War of 1812 at Charleston as a private in an artillery company of Alston's Third Regiment of the South Carolina Infantry. On May 5, 1816, he married 16-year-old Edna Ella Atkins and was baptized into the fellowship of the Providence Baptist Church in Abbeville County. By then, whatever education he had received was sufficient enough for him to become a school teacher.

**Jordan D. Williams** (1794 to 1862)

**Edna Ella Atkins** (1800-58)

*Their Children:*

Abner Jordan Williams (1824-99)

Julia McCain (1825-81)

James B. Williams (1828-62)

Sarah (Sally) Henry (1830 to 1906)

Jordan J. Williams (1834 to 1912)

Elizabeth Long (1836 to unknown)

Jesse Williams (1838 to 1840s)

**Thomas Joseph Williams** (1843 to 1921)

In 1818, Jordan and Edna moved with her parents to the frontier territory that would become the state of Alabama three years later. He purchased land in the Trussville area of Jefferson County and became a deacon of the pioneer Cahaba Baptist Church. Teaching was a challenging profession in frontier Alabama; a half century would pass before the state legislature established public schools. Jordan would have taught privately in his students' homes or his own, unless a number of families came together to build a one-room schoolhouse or use a church building as a school. It goes without saying that his and Edna's children would be taught and taught well.

When the vast territory that had been the Creek Nation was opened to settlers in 1833, the family moved east to upper Talladega County, where Jordan purchased eighty acres near Isbell's Mill, not far from the village called Talladega, the county seat. Their first home was a simple log cabin. His son Abner later recalled:

*In the summer of 1833, one day while father was absent, a drunk Indian galloped up to the door of our house and ordered my mother to give him whiskey. She told him there was no whiskey in the house, but did not satisfy him, and he dismounted, staggered into the house and stood very near where mother was sitting and sewing with her*

*five little children crouched round and as near as they could get, waving a riding cowhide<sup>1</sup> over her head and again ordered her to give him whiskey. Mother did not move, but pointed her head toward the east door of the house and said, “esta hadkee,” white man is coming, and that caused him to leave the house at once, mount his pony and, yelling a war whoop, gallop off. When father returned that evening and mother told him of her thrilling experience, he was of course very wroth and went to Talladega early next morning determined to cowhide or kill that Indian, but the advice of friends, and a promise of an Indian chief that he would have that Indian punished, and that our family should never again be molested by any of them, he did not execute his purpose, but bought a cowhide and hung it on a nail near the door of our cabin, and ever after when an Indian came in our house they instinctively saw that cowhide as soon as they entered the house, and all of them were quiet and respectful.”*

Jordan continued to teach school as well as help organize the Coosa River Baptist Association. In 1837, he purchased an additional 120 acres adjoining his property, most likely as an investment.

As the eight Williams children began coming of age in the 1840s, the youngest son, Jesse, died, cause unknown. Julia married Anderson McCain in 1843, and James wed Mary F. Lawler four years later. In 1849, Sallie married Robert P. Henry, a Virginia-born carpenter.

Most of the families in agrarian Talladega County lived off the land, rearing their children to become farmers or marry farmers. But the Williams children had little experience with that way of life. The four boys were better educated than other children and less fit for farming. By 1850, Jordan had sold all but eighty of his acres, of which fifteen were cultivated, primarily in corn, by his sons James and Jordan. He owned two horses, a milk cow and one other farm animal. This was subsistence farming—planting just enough crops to feed the family and perhaps generate a bit of income. While the family had no need for field slaves, Jordan did own a female house servant from before 1840 and until the Emancipation.

Jordan realized his call to the ministry and was ordained in 1848. He served as the Baptist Association’s missionary to Talladega, Randolph, Calhoun and St. Clair Counties until 1852. About then, he and Edna moved to Alpine, a community twelve miles southwest of Talladega, where he was associated with the Tallasahatchie Baptist Church. Their son James and his young family remained on the farm. Entries from the journal of James Mallory, a plantation owner near Alpine, noted that Jordan Williams was one of three ministers who preached on Sept. 27, 1846, at the Tallasahatchie church, with nine baptisms; that on Aug. 27, 1854, he presented “a pleasant discourse” there, and several were baptized; and that on June 22, 1856, he and a Brother Collins preached, with “one collecting for foreign and the other domestic missions.”

In 1853, Jordan gave written consent to the marriage of 17-year-old Elizabeth, his remaining daughter, to Josiah H. Long.<sup>2</sup> Abner, still unmarried after completing his education and teaching school in the 1840s, went to work as a clerk at the Curry family’s general store. Located on William Curry’s cotton plantation at Kelly’s Springs, the store also served as the upper county’s post office and was something of a social hub for the community.<sup>3</sup> Abner’s starting salary was five dollars a month, but he proved himself as a merchant and was invited to live with the Curry family. In 1852, he married Agatha Ariadne Heacock. Known as Aggie, she was the daughter of Dr. Joseph and Rachel Heacock of Alpine. A year later, Abner was appointed postmaster for Kelly’s Springs. When Curry died in 1855, Abner was managing the store and earning \$375 a year.

1. A cowhide was a coarse whip woven from strips of leather.

2. The document was witnessed by his fellow Baptist preacher, Sterling Gresham Jenkins.

3. William Curry had moved his established plantation from Georgia to upper Talladega County around 1837, where in no time he became a leading citizen. The general store that served the community was an adjunct to his plantation, and his older sons were apparently not interested in managing it. The experience Abner gained was invaluable, and his first son, born in 1857, would be named Curry.

Abner was ambitious and in the late 1850s moved to Selma with Agatha and their two young children. They were accompanied by his younger brother Jordan, a school teacher. Selma, a city of 3,000, was a major center of the state's cotton trade. From there, bales were transported down the Alabama River to Mobile. Abner took a job with a cotton business, but then returned to Talladega County, where the 1860 census listed him as a farmer in Alpine and the owner of a 15-year-old female slave. His brother Jordan remained in Selma.

The Civil War would have a profound effect on the Williams family. The senior Jordan Williams had fought for American independence from England; fifty years later, his sons would fight for Southern independence from the Union. In the early days, James enlisted as a sergeant in the Alabama 25th Infantry Regiment, followed by the husbands of the three Williams daughters. Thomas, the youngest of the Williams children, later joined the Alabama 58th Infantry Regiment as a private. Although Abner had served as a major in the local militia in the 1840s, he was apparently less eager to take up arms and leave his young family. Instead, he paid a substitute to serve in his place, which was a legal option early in the war. As a civilian, he was appointed purchasing agent for the Confederate conscription camp in Talladega. Then, in 1864, he was conscripted himself, only to be discharged to become a conductor on the Alabama & Tennessee Railroad that linked an ironworks in the upper county with the Confederate arsenal in Selma. There, his brother Jordan had married and continued his work as a school teacher, which apparently exempted him from military service.

On a September Sunday in 1861, Jordan Senior was preaching to Confederate conscript soldiers at the Talladega training camp when he was stricken by what was described as "paralysis," most likely a stroke. He died on Nov. 24, 1862, at his home near the Tallasahatchie Baptist Church. In James Mallory's journal entry for Sunday, Jan. 24, 1863, he "attended the funeral of Br. Jordan Williams, it was preached by Parson Smith."<sup>4</sup> Jordan had dictated his will a month before his death, stating, "I wish to merit this sentence: He lived in the fear, labored in the cause, and died in the favor of God." An obituary in the *Democratic Watchtower* described him as one of the county's "oldest and most respected citizens ... He had a practical and vigorous mind, was energetic, self-reliant, truthful, candid and honest." He was buried in the Tallasahatchie Church Cemetery, where the obelisk still marking his grave is said to be the oldest monument.

Jordan's will named his oldest and youngest sons, Abner and Thomas, as executors, entrusting them with the care of his widow. Following Ella's death, his farmland and the family home were to be sold and the proceeds equally divided among his four sons and three daughters. The only possessions he mentioned were his books, which would be allotted among his children "as suits best." Taking into consideration the possible consequences of the war, he designated that "the land where James B. Williams left his family" (the 80-acre farm outside of Talladega) would go to James's three sons and one daughter, "provided he [James] dies in the Confederate service." In fact, James was indeed dead, having been wounded in the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, six months earlier. The war would also claim the life of his son-in-law, Josiah Long.

Edna died in 1868. Two years later, her three surviving sons—Abner, young Jordan and Thomas—were all living in Selma. Less is known of what became of the three Williams daughters. About 1870, Sarah and her husband Robert Henry moved to east Texas, where he died three years later. Julia remained in Talladega County, and Elizabeth in Oxford, Alabama.

4. The dead were usually buried the day after their demise, but it was not unusual for a funeral sermon to be preached months later; in this case, two months to the day.

## The Children of Jordan Williams

**Abner Jordan Williams** (1824-99)

Agatha Ariadne Heacock (1830 to 1921)

*Their Children:*

Emma Rachel Williams Singleton (1855 to 1937)

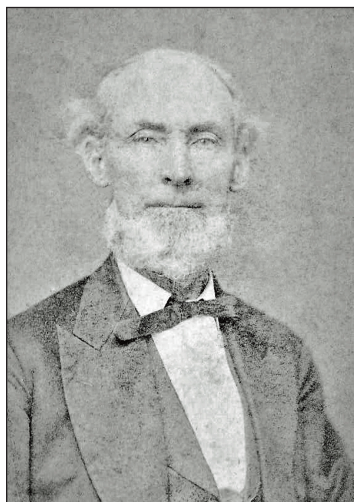
Curry E. Williams (1857 to 1954)

Tranquilla "Mollie" Williams (1859 to 1948)

Joseph Albert Williams (1861 to 1923)

Abner Jordan Williams II (1868 to 1950)

Lillie Belle Williams (1869 to 1950)



Abner and Aggie Williams

After the war, Abner applied to Alabama's provisional governor for amnesty and pardon in order to keep his property from being confiscated. His having worked for the Confederacy primarily in a civilian capacity apparently classified him as a political leader of the rebellion. Addressed to President Andrew Johnson, Abner's appeal stated that during the war "he for some time gave his time and attention as well as his means, as far as able, to the support of indigent soldiers' families in the beat where he lives...." That and his signed oath of loyalty to the United State government were apparently enough to resolve the issue. But he was not cut out to be a farmer. Accompanied by his youngest brother Thomas, the family returned to Selma, where

Abner became a cotton-commission merchant and, in time, president of the chamber of commerce. Even so, he never severed ties with his home county and in 1884, at age sixty, he and Aggie returned to Oxford, where he opened a millinery store. He also served as moderator of the Coosa River Baptist Association for many years, compiling its history. He died in early 1899.

**Julia Williams** (1825-81)

Anderson W. McCain (1823-82)

*Their Children:*

Ann E. McCain (1845-99)

Martha C. McCain (1847 to 1900)

Walton W. McCain (1849 to 1912)

Sarah McCain (1850-79)

William McCain (1852 to 1932)

Julia married Anderson McCain in 1843. He was the farmer son of William Calvin McCain, a Baptist pastor in the Fife community on Choccolocco Creek, which, no doubt, pleased her father. In 1850, Anderson was employed as an overseer on the Curry family's plantation, where Julia's brother Abner managed the general store. After serving the Confederacy, Anderson worked as a farm laborer, but eventually owned a small farm in the Chinabee community of the upper county, where he and Julia quietly lived out their lives.



**James B. Williams** (1828-62)

Mary F. Lawler (1828 to 1907)

*Their Children:*

Henry Jordan Williams (1849 to unknown)

Walker W. Williams (1850 to unknown)

J.C. Williams (1854 to unknown)

E. Williams (1856 to unknown)

James was 19 years old when he and Mary were married in 1847. The state's marriage laws required the male intending to marry to be at least twenty-one years of age, and the female at least eighteen, unless the judge of probate received the parents' consent. Given their ages and Mary's being illiterate, it was probably not a marriage that Jordan consented to gladly. They were married in a civil ceremony and came to live with the Williams family. James died in the Battle of Shiloh, and the fate of Mary and their children is unknown.

**Sarah (Sally) Williams** (1830 to 1906)

Robert Purdie Henry (1828-73)

*Their Children:*

John W. Henry (1854 to unknown)

Annie E. Bush (1856-88)

William Jordan Henry (1851 to unknown)

Sally Lou Henry (1867 to unknown)

Robert M. Henry (1869 to unknown)

Sally married Robert Henry in 1849. He was a carpenter, born in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. After serving the Confederacy, Robert worked as a farm laborer until they migrated to Whitesboro, Texas, in 1869. Whitesboro was a raucous frontier town north of Dallas where female residents were prohibited from leaving their homes on Saturday nights because shootings were so common. The cause of Robert's death in 1873 is unknown. Sally remained in Texas with their five children. She died in Graham, Texas.

**Jordan J. Williams** (1834 to 1912)

Virginia R. Johnson (1841 to 1923)

*Their Children:*

Eugene Williams (1863 to 1908)

Jennie Estelle Thomas (1866 to 1913)

Parke Williams (1868 to 1940)

Charles Williams (1873 to unknown)

Ben E. Williams (1882 to unknown)

Named for his father, Jordan dedicated his life to education. He moved to Selma before 1860, where in 1861, he met and married Virginia Johnson, who was raised on a small farm in Dallas County. As a school teacher, Jordan was apparently exempted from military duty at the beginning of the Civil War, and, although teachers were later drafted, he managed to avoid serving. Virginia gave birth to five children, and the family lived at 608 North Water Ave. By 1878, Jordan had founded a private college preparatory school for young men, and a decade later, he was the principal of St. Andrew's Academy on Broad Street. In the census of 1910, at age 76, he is listed as a school teacher with his "own school" in Selma.

**Elizabeth Williams** (1836 to unknown)

Josiah H. Long (Unknown to 1865)

*Their Children:*

Joe (Josiah, Jr.?) Long (1865 to unknown)

Jordan gave written consent enabling the marriage of 17-year-old Elizabeth, his remaining daughter, to Josiah H. Long in 1853. The document recorded by the county probate court was witnessed by his fellow Baptist preacher, Sterling Gresham Jenkins. Josiah purchased 40 acres after they were wed. He fought with Hardie's Cavalry Battalion in Alabama and Georgia, and most likely died during or soon after the war. The only further record of Elizabeth or their offspring is buried in the 1900 census, which lists 36-year-old Joe Long (born July 1, 1865), an unmarried clerk working in a dry goods store in Selma, where he lived with his uncle Thomas Joseph Williams and his family.

**Thomas Joseph Williams** (1843 to 1921)

**Laura Jane English** (1848 to 1933)

*Their Children:*

Lee English Williams (1875 to unknown)

James Walton Williams (1879 to 1968)

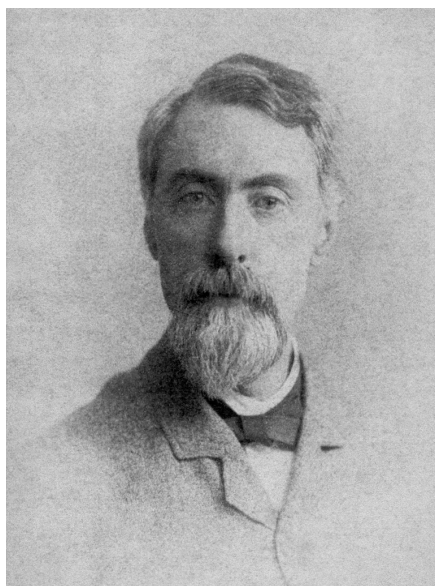
Lewis Crawford Williams (1880 to 1950)

Thomas Leslie Williams (1883 to 1964)

Margaret Mae Woolley (1889 to 1970)

Laura Catherine Apple (1891 to 1955)

Thomas, the youngest of the Williams children, enlisted in the Army of the Confederacy as a private on Sept. 23, 1862, at age twenty. He served in the Alabama 58th Infantry Regiment, Company I, which fought at Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Resaca, Atlanta and Nashville before surrendering at Meridian, Mississippi, when the war ended. By 1870, he and Abner had joined their brother Jordan in Selma, where Thomas took an office job with a cotton processing company. There, he found his calling as a bookkeeper. He returned to Talladega County to marry Laura Jane English of Munford.



Thomas Joseph Williams

Laura and Tom wed on Nov. 13, 1873. How they met is a matter of conjecture. He was five years older than she; he had grown up in the lower county, she in the upper county; he was Baptist, she was Presbyterian; and he was then living 110 miles away. However, her family patronized the Curry store, which his brother Abner had managed in the 1850s, and Abner would have been well acquainted with the Englishes. Also, during the war, Tom and her brother Jim English served the Army of Tennessee and were engaged in the same battles at the height of the war. Whether or not they knew each other then is unknown.

In Selma, Tom and Laura lived in a boarding house on Franklin Street. For Talladegans, Selma was the most accessible city of any size, thanks to the railroad connecting Selma and Rome, Georgia. It stopped at Munford, and Talladega newspapers even advertised Selma businesses. Built on soapstone bluffs overlooking the Alabama River, Selma has been described as "an ardent Southern city." At the beginning of the Civil War, with a population of 3,200, it had become the Confederacy's leading manufacturing center for weaponry and ironclad warships. Safely isolated, the city finally fell to Union

troops in the closing weeks of the war. Although its arsenal was the Federal troops' primary target, much of the city was wantonly destroyed. The burning of homes, businesses and even churches was said to have lasted for two days. But Selma rebounded, and by 1870, its population numbered 6,500, including many freed slaves from the plantations of surrounding Dallas County.

The Williams and Englishes traveled with relative ease and frequency between Selma and Munford, where Laura and her children spent summer months on her family's farm. In the census for Talladega County, recorded in June 1880, she and her two young sons (Lee, aged 6, and Walton, 3) resided there with Laura's mother. Laura was then expecting her third child, Lewis, who was born in Montevallo in September. Three more children would follow: Leslie, in 1883, Mae in 1889 and young Laura in 1891.

Thomas and Laura raised their four sons and two daughters as Baptists in Selma. A sixteen-year gap separated the oldest and youngest, with six years separating the Williams sons and daughters. The older boys most likely received a thorough education at the private school founded and run by their uncle, Jordan Williams. In 1900, the entire family (plus Thomas' nephew, 36-year-old Joe Long) resided at the house they rented at 415 Alabama Ave. Lee (25 years old) was employed as a life insurance agent, having returned home after six years traveling the world as a seaman. Walton (22) worked as a bookkeeper and Lewis (19), as a fireman and horse trainer. Leslie (16), Mae (11) and young Laura (8) attended school. It was the last year the entire Williams family would live together under one roof.

In the early years of the new century, as transportation and communication systems improved, families that weren't tied to the land were apt to scatter far and wide. In the case of Lee Williams, it was *far*. He sailed to South Africa to prospect for gold. It marked the beginning of his venturesome life.

While cotton had powered the economy of the Southern states before the Civil War, the owners of rural land discovered an equally profitable, yet more manageable resource in turning their dense, old-growth forests into lumber. Walton would leave Selma for southern Mississippi to work as a bookkeeper for a lumber company, and Lewis would begin his career with a lumber planing mill in Chattanooga.

Tom continued to work as the bookkeeper and cashier for People's Cotton Oil Co., and in 1909, he and Laura had saved enough to purchase the first home of their own at 909 Green St. By then, only their daughters remained in Selma. A year later, young Laura married Alfred Gill Apple; they settled in Lonoke, Arkansas, his hometown. In Nov. 1911, Thomas, Laura and Mae moved uptown to 116 Green St. A year later, Mae wed Robert Burns (R.B.) Woolley. Over much of the decade, Thomas and Laura shared their home with the young couple. Mae remained the devoted daughter, looking after her parents and keeping in touch with her siblings. At the time of the 1920 Census, Tom and Laura lived alone at 123 Green St., a house they owned, while Mae, R.B. and their two young daughters lived just across the street.



Thomas Joseph Williams

Thomas and his brother-in-law Jim English had a particularly close relationship, perhaps owing to the experiences they shared as soldiers of the Confederacy. On Oct. 20, 1921, Tom wrote from Selma:

*Dear Jimmie,*

*This is my 78th Birthday. Did not sleep very much last night. Had California Grapes, Grits & Milk for Breakfast. Had Pure Pork Sausage, Country Corn (30c for. th.) Corn Bread, Water – Milk & Flour Bread for dinner. Enjoyed it. For some while*

## LAURA ENGLISH WILLIAMS



Laura Williams (right) with her niece Etta English and young daughter Laura, about 1897.

**L**AURA JANE WILLIAMS was three years old when typhoid took the life of her father, Alex English. She was the next youngest of the five children that Margaret Rose English would raise on the family's farm eight miles northeast of Talladega, Alabama. On his deathbed, Alex asked the family's Black servants and field workers "to be kind to his wife and little children," and it was with their devotion that Margaret expanded the farm, increasing its cotton production from one year to the next.

But a decade later, the Civil War upheaved the tranquility of their pleasant, peaceable life. By then, Laura's eldest sister Emma and brother Jim had completed their high school studies, but Sally, Laura and Tom would never be afforded that advantage. Jim enlisted in the Alabama Infantry, while Laura and her sisters dutifully kept their soldier brother clothed in what passed for a uniform and knitted socks for other men in his company. Laura would be remembered for her expertise with a needle and thread, as well as her haphazard penmanship.

Before Laura wed Tom Williams in 1873, no son or daughter in the English lineage is known to have made their home in a town or city. They settled in Selma. Although Laura's mother's farm was a hundred miles away, Laura and her six children would summer there, relishing the company of her sisters and brother, as well as the companionship of cousins. For her son Lee, its woods and creeks were the springboard to a life of exploration and adventure.

The marriage of Thomas and Laura Williams lasted 48 years. They lived modestly and faithfully. Toward the end, he pronounced her a loving, good wife.





*I was so weak that your sister had to wait upon me good deal. I have not been to the office in over ten months.*

*Last week walked more than in quite a while. Had to stop to rest four to five times before getting to Broad Street. When I walk or write a little while, my back hurts me. To lie down on the lounge a little while relieves me soon. If I bring in a bucket of coal, that tires me, so I have to stop & rest. No sick stomach. Hardly ever any ache or pains except in my back. Whenever I have a new development by season of my weakness in my knees, or below to arches, I call in Dr. Gay and he tells me that it is part and parcel of the disease "Hardening of the Arteries."*

*Last month I called upon Dr. Gay to come examine me. He reported that my heart action was fairly good for my age. The Low Blood Pressure was 85. The High Blood Pressure was 130. That, considering my age, was doing very well.*

*No sign of the Bright's Disease, All of which is encouraging. However I got some literature from The Youth's Companion which states that the patient goes out by more than one [unintelligible]. Bright's Disease, Heart or Paralysis. I will stop to rest. One medical writer says that a few records of young people having this Disease, but lived to a good old age. Whenever the Kidneys fail to carry off the waste matter from the System, then comes the end.*

*I propose to take care of myself the best I know. Supplemented by the loving care of your sister. She is a good wife. Also a good nurse. I propose to try the best I know to stay cheerful.*

*Another rest.*

*Have read today's Birmingham News. The President it seems proposes to stand behind the Labor Board. Attorney General Daugherty tells the President that the Laws on the situation are good enough to "go ahead on both Wheels," as Capt'n. Tim Meaker used to tell his Pilot, when his Boat backed out from the Wharf on the Alabama River. The Cotton is practically all out of the fields; coming in pretty freely. Middling in this Market is about 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> to <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> c. Marcus J. Meyer (the Livery Stable man, near our house) told me the other day that his Mule & horse trade was quite light; but that his Collections on back debts was doing very nicely.*

*All doing very nicely except Burns has a severe cold. All join me in love to one & all.*

*Your Brother.*

*Tom*

He lived another five weeks and was buried at Selma's Live Oak Cemetery. His obituary:

*Death claimed T.J. Williams, one of the oldest citizens of Selma, at 9:45 o'clock this morning at his home, 116 Green Street. Mr. Williams was born and raised near Talladega and enlisted in the Confederate army as a young boy. Immediately after the surrender, he came to Selma and entered the cotton business with his brother. Later he married Miss Laura English of Talladega, who, with six children, survive to mourn his loss.*

*For more than two years past, the deceased was in poor health, but up to three weeks ago, he was able to be up and to make occasional trips downtown.*

*Funeral arrangements have not been perfected, pending the arrival of children from distant cities. These are T.L. Williams, Birmingham; L.E. Williams, Purvis, Miss.; J.W. Williams, Lumberton, Miss.; L.C. Williams, Shreveport, La.; Mrs. F.G. Apple, Lonoke, Ark.; Mrs. R.B. Woolley of Selma.*

*As a member of the Central Baptist Church, Mr. Williams for many years took a prominent part in the work of that denomination. He maintained a long and satisfactory business connection with the People's Oil Mill, and his kindly, unselfish spirit made a lasting impression upon many who came in touch with him.*

Tom's Confederate service entitled Laura to a widow's pension. When no official record was located, Jim English certified that his brother-in-law had enlisted in the 58th Alabama Infantry in the summer of 1862, even though the 58th was organized in July 1863, consolidated from companies of the 9th Alabama Battalion. His enlistment



most likely originated with one of those companies, when he would have been not “a young boy,” but somewhat older than the minimal enlistment age of eighteen. In April, Laura began collecting the \$20 monthly payment. In 1923, she moved with the Woolleys across town to 36 W. Alabama Ave. It was a pleasant bungalow with a deep porch on two sides, a few blocks from Live Oak Cemetery to the north and the Alabama River to the south. Then, three years later and after thirty years in Selma, the entire Woolley clan—R.B.’s parents, his siblings, R.B. and Mae—pulled up stakes and moved to St. Petersburg, Florida. There, R.B. continued his career as a linotype operator. Laura, then in her late seventies, had no choice but to accompany them. She died there in 1933, and was buried beside Tom in Selma.

## The Children of Thomas and Laura Williams

Thomas and Laura’s six children included both the oldest and youngest of the ten grandchildren of Alex and Margaret English.

### **Lee English Williams** (1875 to unknown)

Lee Williams was the family’s firstborn and its outlier. Describing himself as “an experienced victim of the wanderlust,” he traveled the world as a seaman most of his adult life, prospecting for gold in South Africa and exploring the Amazon basin. His incredible account of traveling through South America was serialized in a New Orleans newspaper in 1911 and published a century later as *Amazonia 1907: Outside the Circle of Civilization* (Fair Oaks Press, 2019). There is reason enough to believe he was the first man to follow the Amazon from its source in the mountains of Peru to its mouth on the Atlantic Ocean.

Laura and their six children summered with her widowed mother in the countryside, where Lee found adventure in roaming the woods and creeks that surrounded the English family’s cotton fields. In Selma, he attended the college preparatory school for young men founded by one of his uncles. It provided an education that opened his eyes to the outside world: “When as a young boy I played around the farm of my maternal grandmother, if the prediction had been made that I would be a world-wide wanderer, the very suggestion would have met with vehement denial.” Upon graduating in 1893, he became a seaman. Eight years of wandering led him to South Africa, where he joined the horde of foreigners prospecting for gold. Whatever success he had was enough to finance his next move: to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1906.

Only a narrow paper trail of official documents reveals what became of Williams after the *Times-Democrat* published his memoir. Following his South America adventure, he attempted to settle into a normal life. He registered for the World War I draft in Lumberton, Mississippi, in 1918, stating that he was married and resided there, but employed as a machinist for DuPont Engineering in Jacksonville, Tennessee. Two years later, he was working as an insurance agent in Purvis, Mississippi. His childless marriage would end in divorce before he applied for a seaman’s certificate of citizenship in New Orleans in 1925. This was the standard documentation required of crew members of U.S. ocean-going vessels. It freed him to travel the world as a merchant mariner. He was then fifty years old, although he stated his age as forty-one. Census records thereafter show him lodging in boarding houses that catered to seamen in Wilmington, Delaware, and Galveston, Texas, where in 1942 he voluntarily registered for the World War II draft. He was sixty-seven years old, but claimed to be sixty-one. The trail ends there. How, where and when his life ended are unknown.

**James Walton Williams** (1879 to 1968)

Jennie Wells (1882 to 1977)

*Their Children:*

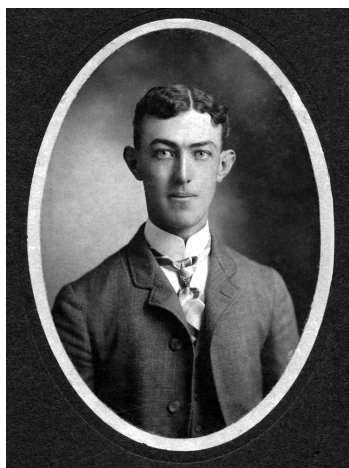
Jennie Wells Williams II (1900-92)

Doyle Douglas Herlocker (1902-98)

James Walton Williams II (1908-83)

Alexander Hinton Williams (1913-79)

Of the four Williams sons, Walton lived the most conventional life. Following in his father's footsteps, he became a bookkeeper, first with a lumber company in Lumberton, Mississippi. There in 1906, he married Jennie Wells Dorsey, a widow with two young daughters, Jennie and Doyle, whom he adopted. Two sons were born to the couple. Walton eventually went to work for the State Railroad Commission in Jackson and later became Supervisor of Motor Carriers for the Interstate Commerce Commission there. The family were members of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, where Jennie served as treasurer, and Walton was a grand patron of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi's annual council. In 1949, the couple retired to Clearwater, Florida, not far from his sister Mae Woolley. He died there at age ninety; his headstone at the City Cemetery in Lumberton, Miss., identifies him as "Rev. James Walton Williams."



Lewis Crawford Williams

**Lewis Crawford Williams** (1880 to 1950)

Ruth M. (1878 to unknown)

*Their Children*

Mary E. Williams (1909 to unknown)

Lewis C. Williams II (1911 to unknown)

Gladys C. (1899–1954)

About 1907, at age 27, he married Ruth M., a native of Louisiana. In 1910, they were living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with their year-old daughter Mary. Lewis worked as an estimator at a lumber planing mill; Ruth was a music teacher.

In September, 1919, Lewis was employed by the Richardson Lumber Co. in Sheffield, Alabama, while Ruth and their two children were living on Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga. They shared their home with three boarders and a servant.

Lewis was living in Shreveport, Louisiana, at the time of his father's death in 1921. A year later, he had moved to Houston, Texas, where he was employed by South Texas Lumber Co. In a March 1925 letter to his mother, he wrote of Ruth and their two children living in Mexico City. It appears that he and Ruth had separated, that she was attached to the American embassy there. Even so, Lewis appears to have maintained a close relationship with both children and to have approved of the cultural opportunities they were enjoying in Mexico. Their marriage ended in divorce. He married Gladys C. in 1942 and lived the remainder of his life employed by a Houston lumberyard.

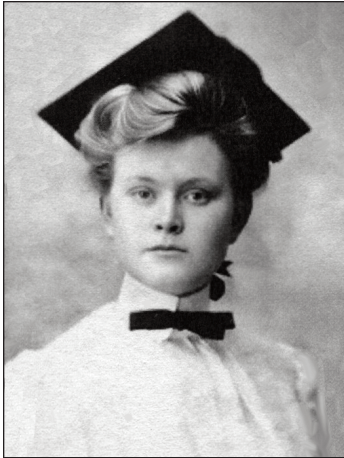
**Thomas Leslie Williams** (1883 to 1964)

Roxie Estelle Wilson (1884 to 1968)

*Their Children*

Lillian Hornick (1917-99)

Thomas Leslie Williams II (1920 to 2003)



Estelle Wilson, 1903

Like his eldest brother Lee, Leslie Williams was not one to settle in one place for long, and like many young men at the turn of the century, he was drawn to railroading, a career that eventually brought him to Birmingham. There, he married Estelle Wilson in 1915. A newspaper announcement of their wedding described her as “a very accomplished woman, possessing noble traits of head and heart.”

Estelle had grown up in Talladega County, where she counted Leslie’s cousin Etta English a dear friend. After earning a teaching degree at Jacksonville State Normal College<sup>4</sup> in 1903, Estelle passed the state teacher’s examination and taught for seven years before taking an office job at the Southern Railway station at Alpine. Leslie was one of several young men romancing her in 1911. Although he was Estelle’s favorite, she wrote to Etta that he was “a dear sweet boy ... but not settled and seems to have no business qualifications whatever. He just seems to have that restless disposition.” Living in Selma in 1913, she became friendly with his sister Mae. When Leslie’s railroad career transferred him to Birmingham,

she followed him there. And they were married.

In 1917, they were living in Chattanooga when their daughter Lillian was born. Three years later, they had returned to Birmingham, where that year’s census described Leslie as an engineer with the belt railroad.<sup>5</sup> Their son was born there in 1920. In 1930, the family lived in Texarkana, Arkansas, where Leslie worked as a conductor for the Louisiana & Pacific Railway, with an annual salary of \$777. Three years later they resided in Mineola, Texas, east of Dallas. By 1939, they had returned to Birmingham. Estelle had, of course, encouraged their children to value an education, and Lillian was then a sophomore at Jacksonville State Teacher’s College, her mother’s alma mater. The following year, Leslie Jr. enrolled there as a freshman, and Estelle moved to Jacksonville and rented a house on West Washington St. where the three of them lived. There is no record of Leslie’s whereabouts, but they apparently lived together in Anniston during the 1940s.

In 1950, Leslie and Estelle resided at New Smyrna Beach on Florida’s Atlantic coast, where he worked as a building contractor. Lillian, then 33 years old, and her husband shared their home. Leslie and Estelle eventually separated without ever divorcing. He returned to Anniston and worked as a brakeman for the L&N Railroad, while she remained with Lillian’s family at Daytona Beach, Florida. In 1964, 83-year-old Leslie, having retired and in declining health, moved from Anniston to Richmond, Virginia, where he lived with his son and his family. Within only a few months, he died and was buried there. Estelle died at Daytona Beach four years later.

*The two Williams daughters were considerably younger than their four brothers. Both would marry men of good character who were closely attached to their parents and siblings, and as resolute in providing for their wives and children as Thomas Williams had been for his.*



Mae and Laura Williams

4. Founded in 1883, the college offered a two-year degree in education.

5. A belt line railway operates in and around a city, primarily transferring freight between long-haul railroads and to other transit modes.

**Margaret Mae Williams** (1889 to 1970)

Robert Burns (R.B.) Woolley (1888 to 1955)

*Their Children*

Laura Frances Burdick (1913 to 2000)

Margaret English Lewis (1914 to 2007)

Ruth Elizabeth Townsend (1920 to 2007)

Robert Burns Woolley II (1922 to 2009)

Thomas William Woolley (1925-94)



Margaret Mae Williams

Named for her grandmother Margaret English, she was known as Mae. After her five siblings abandoned Selma, her faithful letter-writing kept the far-flung Williams children, as well as the family's kinfolk, in close touch. At the same time, she came to assume responsibility for the well-being of their elderly parents. In 1912, she married Robert Burns Woolley. Both had grown up in dedicated Baptist families. Known as R.B., he was then employed as a salesman for the Central Alabama Bakery in Selma. His younger brother worked as a typist for a print shop, which may have influenced R.B.'s taking a job as a linotype operator for the *Selma Journal* daily newspaper. It marked the launch of his life-long career.

After marrying, Mae and R.B. lived with her parents on Green St. for a number of years, until they managed to buy their own home just across the street. By 1923, Mae had given birth to four children: Frances, Margaret, Ruth and young Robert. That year they moved across town to 36 W. Alabama Ave., a pleasant bungalow with a deep porch on two sides, a few blocks from Live Oak Cemetery to the north and the Alabama River to the south. Mae's mother, then two years widowed, lived with them. Their second son was born in 1925 and named Thomas in memory of his grandfather. One year later, when the Florida Land Boom was at its peak, the entire Woolley clan—including R.B.'s parents and siblings—made the momentous decision to leave Selma. R.B., Mae and their five children joined them in relocating to St. Petersburg, where R.B. continued his career as a typesetter with the *St. Petersburg Times*. Laura Williams had no choice but to accompany them.

Although Florida had been promoted as a sort of promised land, decades would pass before R.B. and Mae could afford to purchase a home of their own. They became active members of the First Baptist Church. The 1940 federal census listed 48-year-old Mae as head of the household she occupied with Margaret, 25, a department store sales lady; Ruth, 19, a department store cashier; Robert, 18, a grocery store clerk, and Thomas, 15, a student. (R.B. appeared in no census that year.) Their home at 340 Ninth Ave. North was rented. Five years later, the Florida State Census listed R.B., a 55-year-old retiree; Mae, 52; Ruth Townsend, 24, a cashier; Robert, 22, an air corpsman; and Thomas W, 19, a teacher. By then, they resided at 540 Fourth St. N.; whether their home was owned or rented is unclear. R.B., 61, and Mae, 57, remained there in 1950 with Robert, 28, an unmarried accountant with the power company. R.B. lived another five years. When Mae died in 1970 at age 78, she was survived by their five children, eleven grandchildren and eight great grandchildren.

**Laura Catherine Williams** (1891 to 1956)

Alfred (Fred) Gill Apple (1885 to 1954)

*Their Children*

Alfred Thomas Apple (1913-68)

Helen Catherine Payne (1915-96)

Samuel Guy Apple (1917 to 2000)

Geraldyn Mae Mitchell (1921-88)

Jack Williams Apple (1924 to 2013)

Fred Gill Apple II (1927-88)

Robert Lewis Apple (1930-32)

Nineteen-year-old Laura Williams had completed her high school studies and was working at a Selma department store when she met Fred Apple in 1911. Older by eight years, he was employed in Birmingham as an auditor with a petroleum oil company. They married in Selma and lived in Birmingham for a short time before settling in Lonoke, Arkansas, his hometown. In nearby Little Rock, he continued as an auditor for the Galveston-based Magnolia Petroleum Co., a position he would hold his entire life.

By 1920, Laura had given birth to three children, and the Apples were living in a rented house on Second St. Ten years later, the family was complete with seven children, ranging in age from a year and a half to sixteen. Fred's father worked in real estate, which perhaps facilitated their having purchased the house next door to the senior Apples. Located on McKinley St., it had an estimated value of \$3,500. Thanks to the security of Fred's job, the family came through the Great Depression with less sacrifice than their neighbors. In 1940, the Apple household included Fred, Laura and their children: Thomas (25), Helen (24), Guy (22) and his wife, Geraldyn (18), Jack (15) and Fred Jr. (12). (Their youngest child, Robert, had died at age two.) Helen worked in an office job, Guy was employed as a technician at a radio shop, and Jack had a newspaper delivery route. Fred's annual income of \$2,400 was several times that of their neighbors.



Laura Catherine Williams

Fred had registered for the draft in 1918—then, once again, in 1942. Of his eligible sons, Alfred would enlist with the Marines, Jack and Fred Jr. with the Navy. In the years that followed, all of their children would marry and carry on with families of their own.

In the closing days of 1953, Fred suffered a heart attack and died in a Little Rock infirmary. Colon cancer claimed Laura three years later.

