

JOSEPH WILLIS

By Randy Willis

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The Apostle to the Opelousas

The First Baptist Preacher of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ West of the Mississippi River

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www.randywillis.org

Joseph Willis' tombstone reads: "First Baptist Preacher of the Word West of the Mississippi River." This historical fact placed him in the history books but is only a footnote in this remarkable man's life.

His life reads as a dramatic play performed on the stage of history. He was born an Indian slave to his own father. His family took him to court to deprive him of his inheritance, a battle that involved the governor of the state. He fought in the Revolutionary War under the most colorful of all the American generals, Francis Marion, "The Swamp Fox." He placed his own life in harms way by crossing the most hostile country and entered a land under a foreign government while the dreaded "Black Code" was in effect. He preached a message there that put him in constant danger. He fought racial and religious prejudice of the most dangerous kind. He lost three wives and several children in the wilderness but never wavered in his belief in God.

Joseph Willis' American roots do not begin in Louisiana but in Southeast Virginia in the Chesapeake Bay area, the same area that the Pilgrims first settled. There in the 1740's, in Isle of Wight and Nansemond Counties (now the city of Suffolk) was the place that Joseph Willis' father, three uncles and one aunt called home. The family came to America from Devonshire, England (although there is some evidence that the family immigrated from Wales). I believe, but I cannot prove it, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the English father of these five children was Benjamin Willis, Jr. (born circa 1690) and the grandfather was Benjamin Willis, Sr. (born circa 1670).

These four Willis brothers were Joseph's father, Agerton Willis (born circa 1727; died 1777), and his brothers Daniel Willis (born circa 1716; died 1785), Benjamin Willis III (born circa 1725; died 1785), and George Willis (born circa 1730). The one known sister of these four brothers was Joanna Willis (born circa 1730; died 1791). Joanna married James Council (born circa 1716) of Isle of Wight County, Virginia in about 1751. James was the son of John Council and Benjamin Willis Jr.'s sister Josie Willis (born circa 1681), and grandson of Hodges Council. Hodges' family had also immigrated from Devonshire, England to America.

In the early 1750's, the four brothers along with James and Joanna moved south. Between 1740 and 1770, hundreds of Virginians moved to North Carolina as a result of the Virginia legislature passing a law requiring all non-residents to acquire ten acres of land for each head of stock ranging in the colony or to become citizens.

The family left Virginia, probably by sea, and landed down the coast at New

Hanover (now named Wilmington), North Carolina. New Hanover had North Carolina's most navigable seaport and even though it was not used much for transatlantic trade, this meant the area of the state was easily accessible from all other English settlements along the coast.

Well-to-do North Carolina Planters

It was here that Joseph's father, Agerton, would first buy land in North Carolina. On December 13, 1754, he purchased 300 acres in New Hanover in what is now southeastern Pender County "on the East Side of a Branch of Long Creek." Pender was not established until 1874. New Hanover included what is now Pender and parts of Brunswick County.

Agerton was taxed on this property the next year, 1755. There were only 362 white people taxed in New Hanover that year. About twenty families owned a great number of slaves there during that time. These families and others like them in southeastern North Carolina controlled the affairs of the counties, in which they lived and set the standards of morals and religion.

Between 1755 and 1758, Agerton moved to Bladen County, just to the northeast. Daniel, Benjamin and Joanna and her husband James Council, had been living there since 1753. It was there between 1755 and 1758, that Agerton's only son, Joseph, was born. Joseph would someday play a major roll in early Louisiana Baptist history.

Most of the early Bladen County deeds, before 1784, were lost due to a series of fires; thus we are unable to find Agerton's first purchase of land

in Bladen County. Nevertheless a description of the bulk of his lands can be gleaned from later deeds. He purchased 640 acres from his brother Daniel on May 21, 1762, on the West Side of the Northwest Cape Fear River. He then purchased an additional 2,560 acres between October 1766 and May 1773, which was located on both sides of the Northwest Cape Fear River near Goodman's Swamp. Altogether, Agerton's holdings formed a very large and nearly contiguous extent of land on both sides of the Northwest Cape Fear River near the current Cumberland County line in present-day northwest Bladen County.

Agerton, Daniel, Benjamin, James, and Joanna were all neighbors on the Northwest Cape Fear River. The other brother, George Willis, came first to New Hanover, obtaining a land grant on Widow Creek in 1761 and selling out in 1767. He then moved to Robeson County (formerly part of Bladen County) not very far west from the rest of the family.

The four brothers were all well-to-do planters with large land holdings. As a large planter, Agerton would have owned slaves.

"An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves"

It was to a part-Indian slave of Agerton's that his only son, Joseph, was born. The relationship of Agerton and Joseph's mother can only be speculation, but under the North Carolina laws of 1741 all interracial marriages were illegal. Since Joseph's mother was a slave he was born to a slave-status. It is clear from Agerton's will that his father considered him as his only son and loved him as one. This fact did not sit well with some

other members of the family.

Clearly, Agerton intended to free Joseph, but this presented great legal problems. The laws of 1741, in North Carolina, stated in "An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves" "That no Negro or Mulatto Slaves shall be set free, upon any Pretense whatsoever, except for meritorious Services, to be adjudged and allowed of by the County Court and License thereupon first had and obtained."

In her book, "North Carolina Indian Records," Donna Spindel writes about the Indians of this area of the state and the broad use of the term mulatto:

"The Lumbee Indians, most of whom reside in Robeson County, constitute the largest group of Indians in eastern North Carolina. Although their exact origin is a complex matter, they are undoubtedly the descendants of several tribes that occupied eastern Carolina during the earliest days of white settlement. Living along the Pee Dee and Lumber rivers in present-day Robeson and adjacent counties, these Indians of mixed blood were officially designated as Lumbees by the General Assembly in 1956. ...Most of the Indians have Anglo-Saxon names and they are generally designated as 'black' or 'mulatto' in nineteenth-century documents; for example, in the U.S. Censuses of 1850-1880, the designation for Lumbee families is usually 'mulatto.' "

According to one of North Carolina's top genealogists and historians, the late William Perry Johnson, "In North Carolina, American Indians up until

Mid 1880's, were labeled Mulattos"

Joseph could not be freed solely by Agerton's wishes. Agerton was in poor health and Joseph was still too young to prove "meritorious Services," therefore Agerton attempted to free him through his will, written September 18, 1776, and also to bequeath to him most of his property. Just eighty-days before this will was written, the Declaration of Independence was signed and times were, to say the least, chaotic. This was not the time to get anything through the court and time was running out, for Agerton would be dead within a year.

My Cousin's Keeper

The problem for Joseph was that the family was advised that this part of the will could be overturned, and thus, Joseph would not be freed according to his father's wishes. This was an important legal point for a slave could not legally inherit real estate at this time in North Carolina. Therefore, if Joseph was not freed he could not be a legal heir. Since Agerton had no other children, this would make his eldest brother "legal heir at law" under the laws of primogeniture in effect until 1784. It is clear that Agerton had intended the trustee to obtain Joseph's freedom and then he could obtain his inheritance but Agerton's brother Daniel ignored these wishes as the following letter to the governor of North Carolina reveals:

Daniel Willis Senr. To Gov. Caswell Respecting Admtn. & C.

(From MS Records in Office of Secretary of State.)

"Oct. 10th 1777.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY

I have a small favr. [sic] to beg if your Excellency will be pleased to grant it Viz. as my Deceas'd [sic] Brother Agerton Willis gave the graitest [sic] Part of his Estate to his Molata [sic] boy Joseph and as he is a born slave & not set free Agreeable to Law my Brothers heirs are not satisfied that he shall have it. I am One of the Exectrs. [sic] and by Mr. M. Grice's Directions have the Estate in my possession as the Trustee Refused giving Security that the boy should have it when off [sic] Age If he Could Inherit it and now this seting [sic] of counsel some of them Intends to Apply for Administration as graitest [sic] Creditors [sic]. I am my Brothers heir at Law and if Administration is to be obtained I will apply myself Before the Rise of the Counsel and begg [sic] your Excellency will not grant it to any off [sic] them Untill [sic] I Come your Excellency's Compliance will graitley [sic] Oblige your most Obedient Humble Servt [sic] to Command

DAN. WILLIS, SEN.

Pray Excuse my freedm. [sic]"

Daniel's petition to the court also reveals that Joseph was not of legal age

as of the date of the will, September 18, 1776. Legal age was then twenty-one; therefore, Joseph could not have been born before September 18, 1755, as some have supposed. It should also be pointed out that technically this case should have proceeded to the District Superior Court at Wilmington but this court was in abeyance until 1778, following the collapse of the Court Law in November, 1772. Therefore, Daniel was writing to the Governor and Council instead.

The Bladen County tax list of 1784 indicates that the case had been decided by then, since Agerton's property was taxed in that year under different family member's names. Even though Agerton's will had been probated and Joseph was living as if he were free, as he had always done, he was still technically a slave.

In November of 1787, Joseph's first cousin John Willis, by then a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina and ironically the eldest son of Daniel, introduced a "bill to emancipate Joseph, a Mulatto Slave, the property of the Estate of Agerton Willis, late of Bladen, deceased." The bill passed its third reading on December 6, 1787, and Joseph was free. The following quotes from the settlement listed in the final act are of interest:

"Whereas, Agerton Willis, late of Bladen County...did by his last will and testament devise to the said Joseph his freedom and emancipation, and did also give unto the said Joseph a considerable property, both real and personal: And whereas the executor and next of kin to the said Joseph did in pursuance of

the said will take counsel thereon, and were well advised that the same could not by any means take effect, but would be of prejudice to the said slave and subject him still as property of the said Agerton Willis; whereupon the said executor and next of kin, together with the heirs of the said Agerton Willis, deceased, did cause a fair and equal distribution of the said estate, as well as do equity and justice in the said case to the said Joseph, as in pursuance of their natural love and affection to the said Agerton, and did resolve on the freedom of the said Joseph and to give an equal proportion of the said estate...Joseph Willis shall henceforward be entitled to all the rights and privileges of a free person of mixed blood: Provided nevertheless, That this act shall not extend to enable the said Joseph by himself or attorney, or any other person in trust for him, in any manner to commence or prosecute any suit or suits for any other property but such as may be given him by this act..."

There is a lot revealed in this document. First, note that they call themselves the "next of kin" to the said Joseph. The "fair and equal distribution" that is spoken of turns out to be considerably less than the "greatest [sic] Part" mentioned in Daniel's letter. A later deed reveals that Joseph got 320 acres as settlement and the above document indicates he also received some personal property as "consideration" for what "he may have acquired by his own industry." As we are about to see Joseph Willis could certainly relate to another Joseph, from the Bible, who later in his life would say "they meant it for evil but God meant it for good."

The other property that Joseph should have received is described as "unbequeathed lands of Agerton" in later deeds because this part of the will was overturned. These deeds reveal that Joseph should have received at least 2,490 acres and other deeds are no doubt lost. There was also a vast amount of personal property that Joseph did not get. There was also an additional 970 acres deeded directly to other members of the family. Agerton's will is lost and this information is gleaned from other documents and later deeds.

Nothing but a Horse, Bridle and Saddle

Many years later, in Louisiana, Joseph would tell his grandchildren, Polk and Olive Willis, who were tending to him in his last months, that he left North Carolina "with nothing but a horse, bridle and saddle." Polk and Olive later told their nephew Dr. Greene Strother this fact and Greene Strother told me (also see Greene Strother's Unpublished Th.M. thesis "About Joseph Willis" and his book "The Kingdom Is Coming"). Different grandchildren also asked him from time to time about the family, and he would tell how his mother was part Indian and his father was English, and that he was born in Bladen County, North Carolina. Family tradition is consistent among all the different branches of the family that I have traced. Every branch of the family, including some that have had no contact in many generations, has this identical family tradition handed down.

Joseph's first cousin, John Willis, who helped emancipate him, became a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1782, 1787, 1789 and 1791, a member of the Senate in 1794 and of the House of Representatives in 1795. In the same year that he helped obtain Joseph's "legal freedom," 1787,

he was appointed one of a committee of five from North Carolina to ratify the Constitution of the United States. This was done just in time for North Carolina to enter the Union as the twelfth state and too assist in the election of George Washington as the first President. In 1795, Governor Samuel Ashe commissioned John Willis as a Brigadier General in the 4th Brigade of the Militia Continental Army. The land that the county seat of Robeson County, North Carolina (Lumberton), is located on was donated by him from his Red Bluff Plantation. A plaque of General John Willis stands there today. John Willis moved to Natchez, Mississippi, in about 1800 and died April 3, 1802. He is buried behind the Natchez Cathedral. His son Thomas was almost elected Attorney General of Louisiana.

The Swamp Fox

It was during these trying times for Joseph that the Revolutionary War began. Joseph and a friend of his from Bladen County, Ezekiel O'Quin, left for South Carolina to join up with General Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox." Marion operated out of the swampy forest of the Pedee region in the lower part of South Carolina. His strategy was to surprise the enemy, cut his supply lines, kill their men and release any American prisoners they might have. He and his men then retreated swiftly back again to the thick recesses of the deep swamps. They were very effective and their fame was widespread.

They also took great pride in themselves. Marion's orderly book states, "Every officer to provide himself with a blue coatee, faced and cuffed with scarlet cloth, and lined with scarlet; white buttons; and a white waistcoat and breeches...also, a cap and a black feather." Joseph would later proudly

tell his family, "We were called Marion men." The lessons learned with Marion would serve him well his entire life. Joseph was proud of his service under Marion, for at the time in Bladen County in 1777, it was estimated that two-thirds of the people were Tories. An oath of allegiance to the state was also required at that time in North Carolina and those refusing to take it were required to leave the state within sixty-days.

It was in South Carolina, with the Marion men, that Joseph would become a friend with Richard Curtis, Jr. Curtis was to play a major role in Joseph's decision to go west. Later, in 1791, Curtis would become the first Baptist minister to establish a church in Mississippi. Ezekiel O'Quin would later follow Joseph to Louisiana, as the second Baptist minister west of the Mississippi River, in Louisiana. In 1786, part of Bladen County became Robeson County and Ezekiel is listed as the head of a household there in 1790. Early Louisiana author, W. E. Paxton, in his book "A History of the Baptist of Louisiana, from the Earliest Times to the Present" (1888), would write many years later that Ezekiel was born in 1781, and every major author that followed used that date. Of course, this could not be true if he fought in the Revolutionary War and was a head of a household in 1790. Ezekiel's son John also wrote that Ezekiel "grew up in the same area as Joseph."

Soon, after the Revolutionary War, Joseph would marry Rachel Bradford. Rachel was born about 1762. They named their first child after Joseph's father, Agerton Willis. He was born circa 1785. I'm a descendant of this son. Mary Willis was born next, about 1787. Both children were born in North Carolina. Later, Louisiana census records confirm North Carolina as their place of birth.

The last mention of Joseph in North Carolina was in the 1788 tax list of Bladen County. He was listed with 320 acres. Taxed in the same district, in 1784, was a William Bradford, whom I suspect was Rachel's father.

By 1790 Joseph was living with Rachel in Cheraws County (now Marlboro, Chesterfield and Darlington Counties), South Carolina, just southwest of Bladen County, across the state line. The 1790 census lists him as the head of the household there with two females and one male over 16. It was also here that Rachel died, about 1794; she would have only been about 32-years-old. It is also of interest to note that Richard Curtis, Sr. was on a jury list in 1779 for the Cheraws District. This indicates that the Curtis family lived in this area for at least a short time. Other historians have stated that the family was living in southern South Carolina at this time.

By 1794, Joseph had moved to Greenville County (Washington Circuit Court District), South Carolina and purchased 174 acres on the south side of the Reedy River on May 3, 1794. Two adjoining tracts of 226 acres were purchased on August 16, 1794, and 200 acres were purchased on May 8, 1775, also on the Reedy River. These three tracts totaled 600 acres. The 226 acres had rent houses and orchards on it.

These deeds also give us the name of Joseph's second wife, Sarah an Irish woman. In South Carolina two more "known children" were born to Joseph and Rachel: Joseph Willis, Jr., born about 1792 and Rachel's last child (named after her), Rachel Willis, born circa 1794. Joseph's wife Rachel may well have died in childbirth. Also, two children were born in South Carolina to

Joseph and Sarah: Jemima Willis, born circa 1796, and Sarah's last child named after her, Sarah Willis born about 1798 (she later married Nathaniel West). Sarah is called Joseph's wife in a deed dated August 8, 1799, but died soon thereafter. Joseph lost two wives in about six years. These were the first of a series of personal tragedies.

A Baptist Through & Through

In Greenville County, South Carolina Joseph became more active in the church joining the Main Saluda Church. He attended the Bethel Association as a delegate from Main Saluda from 1794 to 1796 with church reports. Bethel Association was the most influential Baptist Association in the "Carolina Back Country" at that time. Main Saluda was declared extinct by 1797 and Joseph became a member of the Head of Enoree Baptist Church. Head of Enoree (known as Reedy River since 1841) was also a member of the Bethel Association. Joseph is listed in the Head of Enoree Chronicles, along with William Thurston, as an "outstanding member" of Head of Enoree. It was this same William Thurston that would buy Joseph's 600 acres for \$1,200 on August 8, 1799, after Joseph returned from a trip to Mississippi in 1798. It was also here at Head of Enoree that Joseph was first licensed to preach. After the 1798 trip to Mississippi, Joseph returned to South Carolina to move his family and sell his property. Never one to squander time, he helped in incorporating the "Head of Enoree Baptist Society" in 1799 before leaving. It seems that he tarried until the spring of 1800 to depart on his second trip west, thereby avoiding the winter weather.

Joseph's religious background seems to have been strongly influenced by the

Separate Baptists in North Carolina as well as South Carolina, although he came into contact with other influences in both states. The Bethel Association, prior to 1804, held in general Calvinistic sentiments. The majority of Baptists that entered the South Carolina backcountry, which included Greenville County, were at first known as Separates. Another member of the Bethel Association in 1797 was William Ford. Later, in Louisiana, Joseph was closely associated with a William Prince Ford and gave his diary to him, but it seems this William Ford was originally from Kentucky.

The Separates came from New England and were one of the effects of the Great Awakening led by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. This "new awareness" caused a division in the Congregational churches into groups called Old Lights and New Lights. The New Lights claimed the religion of the Old Lights had grown soulless and formal and no longer had the light of scriptural inspiration. Therefore, since the New Lights withdrew from the Congregational churches, the New Lights were known as Separates. The Separates had great missionary zeal and spread at a rapid pace to the other colonies.

It was Shubal Stearns that led the Separates into North Carolina. He established Sandy Creek Church in Guilford (now Randolph) County in 1755. Stearns and his followers ministered mainly to the English settlers. Forty-two churches were established from Sandy Creek in seventeen-years.

An interesting side note is that just a few years before Joseph became a member at Head of Enoree, the pastor of Head of Enoree in 1793, Thomas Musick was excommunicated for immorality. This same man later organized the

Fee Fee Baptist Church in Missouri in 1807 (according to their church history) located just across the Mississippi River, near St. Louis. Fee Fee would certainly be the oldest Baptist church west of the Mississippi River in the entire United States, if this were accurate. Calvary Baptist Church, at Bayou Chicot, Louisiana was not established until 1812. Nevertheless, Musick did not preach west of the Mississippi River until several years after Joseph Willis and after the Louisiana Purchase.

Mississippi Missionary

As mentioned before, Joseph was a member of Head of Enoree in 1797. Late that year or the next, he made his first trip to Mississippi with Richard Curtis, Jr. This trip was made without his family, as was the custom of the time to venture farther west, find a safe place and then return for the family. Baptist historian, W. E. Paxton records the results of this first trip:

"They sought not in vain, for soon after their return they were visited by William Thompson, who preached unto them the Gospel of our God: and on the first Saturday in October, 1798, came William Thompson, Richard Curtis and Joseph Willis, who constituted them into a church, subject to the government of the Cole's Creek church, calling the newly constituted arm of Cole's Creek, 'The Baptist Church on Buffaloe.'"

This church was located near Woodville, Mississippi and the Mississippi River east of Alexandria, Louisiana. Joseph returned for his family by 1799,

but it would seem he might have made a trip across the river into Louisiana before this date, since this is where he returned with his family.

Curtis had already made one trip to this part of the country in 1780. In that year Richard Curtis, Jr. along with his parents, half-brother and three brothers, and all their wives, together with John Courtney and John Stampley and their wives, set out for Mississippi. Mississippi Baptist historian T. C. Schilling wrote that "two brothers by the name of Daniel and William Ogden and a man by the name of Perkins, with their families, most of whom were Baptists" were also along on this first trip.

The late Dr. Greene Strother, maternal great-grandson of Joseph Willis, told me that it was family tradition in his family that Joseph's first trip into Louisiana was in search of a Willis Perkins. Years later (1833) in Louisiana, a Willis Perkins was a member of Occopy Baptist Church while Joseph was pastor. Census records reveal that this Willis Perkins would have had to be a son of the latter.

The Curtises, like the Willises, were originally from Virginia. Paxton wrote:

"The Curtises were known to be Marion men, and when not in active service, they were not permitted to enjoy the society of their families, but they were hunted like wild beasts from their hiding places in the swamps of Pedee." They were a thorn in the side of the British and their Tory neighbors."

Paxton continued,

"They left South Carolina in the spring of 1780 traveling by land to the northeastern corner of Tennessee. There they built three flat boats and when the Holston River reached sufficient depth toward the end of that year, they set out for the Natchez country of Mississippi by way of the Holston, Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers. Those mentioned above traveled on the first two boats; the names of those on the last boat are not known. Those in the last boat had contracted smallpox and were required to travel a few hundred yards behind the other two boats. Somewhere near the Clinch River, on a bend in the Tennessee River near the northwestern corner of Georgia, they were attacked by Cherokee Indians. The first two boats escaped, but the third boat was captured. The price paid for this attack was high, for the Indians contracted smallpox from them and many died."

Those on the first two boats continued on their voyage and landed safely at the mouth of Cole's creek about 18 miles above Natchez by land. Here in this part of the state they lived. They called Richard Curtis, Jr., who was licensed to preach in S. Carolina, as their preacher. He would later organize the first Baptist Church in Mississippi, in 1791, called Salem. As time passed the population increased. Some were Baptists such as William Chaney from South Carolina and his son Bailey. A preacher from Georgia by the name of Harigail also arrived here and zealously denounced the 'corruptions of Romanism.' This, along with the conversion of a

Spanish Catholic by the name of Stephen d'Alvoy, brought the wrath of the Spanish authorities. To make an example of d'Alvoy and Curtis, they decided to arrest them and send them to the silver mines in Mexico. Warned of this plan, d'Alvoy and Curtis and a man by the name of Bill Hamberlin fled to South Carolina, arriving in the fall of 1795. Harigail also escaped and fled this area."

Paxton said that the country between Mississippi and South Carolina was "then infested by hostile Indians." It is for this reason and others, I believe, that Curtis brought Joseph Willis with him when he returned to Mississippi in 1798, and the fact that Joseph was a licensed Baptist preacher and Curtis was an ordained Baptist preacher. Curtis also knew well Joseph Willis' courage under fire since both were Marion men in the Revolutionary War.

After the trip with Curtis to Mississippi in 1798, Joseph returned to South Carolina for his family and to sell his property. As mentioned before, he sold all of his real estate to William Thurston in August of 1799, indicating his preparation to depart South Carolina.

The First Sermon Ever Preached by an Evangelical Minister West of the Mississippi River

The exact date that Joseph preached west of the Mississippi River is not known, but it was before April 30, 1803; the date of the Louisiana Purchase and most likely before October 1, 1800; the date Napoleon secured Louisiana from Spain.

There are three facts that confirm the above statements. First, Joseph sold out in South Carolina in 1799 and is not found there in the 1800 census. Second, very early historian David Benedict wrote in 1813 in his book "A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World" (1813), "...Joseph Willis... has done much for the cause, and spent a large fortune while engaged in the ministry, often at the hazard of his life, while the State belonged to the Spanish government." That would place Joseph Willis in Louisiana before October 1, 1800. Benedict wrote this fact just 10-years after the Louisiana Purchase; he was a contemporary of Joseph Willis. Third, The Louisiana Baptist Associational Committee wrote in Joseph Willis' obituary in 1854, "The Gospel was proclaimed by him in these regions before the American flag was hoisted here." That would have been before April 30, 1803. The following statement by Paxton is often used to contradict the above two:

"Where he entered the State or what route he took I can only conjecture. Only this is known: In November of this year [1804] he preached the first sermon ever preached in the State west of the Mississippi River by other than Catholic priests. This was at Vermillion, about forty miles southwest of Baton Rouge. At night he preached at Plaquemine Brul'e. This was during a visit in which he preached but three or four times, and that at the peril of his life." Vermillion was what is now Lafayette and Plaquemine Brule was located in Acadia Parish about 13-miles northeast of Crowley near present-day Branch, Louisiana."

Paxton is writing about what he knows of Joseph's missionary work after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The movements of Joseph before the Louisiana Purchase were even more dangerous and thus no records exist except the aforementioned two historical statements. Bienville's Black Code that permitted "the exercise of the Roman Catholic Creed only" was still in effect before the Louisiana Purchase. In January 1797, deLemos issued regulations that made it mandatory for children of non-Catholic emigrant families to embrace Roman Catholicism and also forbade the coming of any ministers into the territory except Roman Catholics. It is a historical fact that Joseph helped establish a church near Woodville, Mississippi in 1798, very near the Mississippi River. Joseph Willis first preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ West of the Mississippi River between 1800 and 1803. This would qualify as the first sermon ever preached by an evangelical minister West of the Mississippi River in any state or future state. This certainly would qualify as one most incredibly feats, by a person born to a slave-status in American history.

The Barefoot Preacher

Joseph then moved farther west, to Ville Platte, Louisiana. There is an interesting story that Pastor J. D. Scott of Alexandria was told in 1945 by a very elderly lady, Grandma DeVille from Bayou Chicot, Louisiana, in the presence of Pastor Theo Cormier. Theo Cormier interpreted her French. She was old enough to remember a man by the name of John Shaw who previously had been a schoolteacher and had a private school in Ville Platte. It was to Ville Platte that Joseph fled after being run out of Vermillion for preaching the Gospel. Here he met John Shaw. After discovering that Joseph

was a Baptist preacher, John invited him into his home and made his school available for Joseph's preaching. This began the first meetings held on a regular basis by a Baptist preacher west of the Mississippi, the year was 1805. He was also the first resident pastor in Louisiana. It was not long before he met opposition from the Catholics and both his and his family's lives were threatened. Joseph told the story in later years that he once had to flee, barefooted, from the "mob of Catholics" who were after him in the middle of the night.

John Shaw and Joseph Willis were told to leave or else. They loaded their belongings and families onto a wagon and headed to Texas. But when they got as far as Bayou Chicot, Joseph's conscience reminded him that he was a missionary called by God. He told Mr. Shaw that he would have to get off, for God had sent him there to do missionary work and he would be violating what he knew to be the will of God. He was not going to run any more. The family lived there for approximately the next 25-years. Joseph bought property, farmed, raised a family and preached Jesus. Mr. Shaw went on to Texas; when they got to Burr's Ferry, near present-day Toledo Bend, they camped because the Sabine River was up. One of his two children died there and was buried on the banks of the Sabine. His wife later died in Texas. Shaw then returned to Bayou Chicot and remarried.

Joseph settled at Bayou Chicot in 1805. The next year the Mississippi Baptist Association was organized. Though a licensed minister, a church had never ordained him. It was his belief that the church should ordain him and that such should be done too give him the authority too organize a church. Some have questioned this and have asked why he did not just organize one

anyway without his ordination. The answer is clear that he felt that to do so was wrong. He had learned in North Carolina the hard way to dot every "i" and cross every "t" and later he learned the value of being a strong member of the Bethel Association in South Carolina. He knew well the importance of banding together with other believers, but there had been no need for ordination before because the population at that time in Louisiana was very sparse. He had only six members in 1812 when he organized Calvary Baptist Church. He had lived there for seven-years already. Before that, his ministry was on a one-on-one or one-on-two basis. But now, Louisiana was growing at a rapid pace. In 1812 the state population was slightly over 80,000. Eight-years later it was over 200,000, yet this section of the state was still thinly populated with churches twenty to fifty-miles apart and having little communication with each other.

The Fiery Furnace

In 1810 Joseph left for Mississippi to be ordained. His son, Joseph, Jr., would later often speak of he and his father crossing the Mississippi River at Natchez and how dangerous it could be. It was also said that Joseph once crossed the mighty river riding a mule in order to take a short cut and save time.

After reaching Mississippi, once again prejudice raised its ugly head. Joseph took his letter to a local church stating that he was a member in good standing while in South Carolina. Such was the custom then as now amongst Baptists to transfer church membership by a letter. But the church to which he gave his letter objected to his ordination "lest the cause of

Christ should suffer reproach from the humble social position of his servant." Paxton states: "Such obstacles would have daunted the zeal of any man engaged in a less holy cause." The "humble social position" of Joseph was certainly not his wealth but the fact that his skin was swarthy. I'm often reminded when I think of Joseph Willis at this point in his life of the statement that: "the test of a man's character is what it takes to discourage him."

Once again we see a very important personality trait of Joseph's that is recorded over and over again. He was long-suffering and willing to pay whatever price necessary to proclaim the Gospel. After being betrayed by family, losing two wives and now being rejected by his own denomination he never became embittered. In Joseph's mind and heart, no price is too high for the cause of Christ. His focus is not on the fiery furnace of life but on the fourth Man in the fire with him. He knew the safest place in life to be is in the fiery furnace because that is where the fourth Man (Christ) is.

Paxton wrote of Joseph's heart: "...he was a simple-hearted Christian, glowing with the love of Jesus and an effective speaker."

His youngest son Aimuewell said before his own death in 1937 "the secret of his father's success was personal work." He said that as a boy he saw his father go to a man in the field, hold his hand and then witness to him until he surrendered to Christ. Today, many generations later, his influence can still be seen. One grandchild said he would be reading the Bible and talking to them. A few of them would slip away and he would say "children you can slip away from me, but not from God."

According to Paxton: "Joseph was never 'daunted' for his was a high calling, a single-mindedness of purpose."

Rev. Joseph Willis & The Churches

After the rejection in Mississippi, he was advised by a friendly minister to obtain a recommendation from the people he worked among. This he did and presented it to the Mississippi Association. The association accepted the recommendation, ordained Joseph, and constituted a church called Calvary at Bayou Chicot on November 13, 1812. Calvary Baptist Church is still active today. Louisiana had been a state barely seven-months and was in a state of turmoil. Great Britain did not consider the Louisiana Purchase legally valid and Congress had declared war on Great Britain the past June; The War of 1812.

Just a month and a day earlier on the Boque Chitto River in what is now Washington Parish, Half Moon Bluff Baptist Church was organized. Located approximately eight-miles from the Mississippi border, Half Moon Bluff was the first Baptist Church organized in what is now Louisiana but was east of the Mississippi River. Some fifteen to twenty-miles southwest of Half Moon Bluff Church, Mount Nebo Baptist Church was organized on January 31, 1813. Half Moon Bluff is extinct but Mount Nebo is still active.

The Methodists established a church even before these dates near Branch, Louisiana, but the first non-Catholic church in Louisiana was Christ Church in New Orleans. Its' first service was held November 17, 1805, in the

Cabildo, and it was predominantly Episcopal.

Paxton wrote "The zeal of Father Willis, as he came to be called by the affectionate people among whom he labored, could not be bounded by the narrow limits of his own home, but he traveled far and wide." Once when he was traveling and preaching, he stayed at an Inn. There were several other men staying there. One of these men was sick and Joseph read the Bible to him, prayed with him and witnessed to him about Christ. The next morning all of the men were gone very early except the man who was sick. He told Joseph that the night before he had overheard the men talking about Joseph and that they had gone ahead to ambush him. He told him about another road to take and Joseph's life was spared.

Those who loved him called Joseph Willis the "Apostle to the Opelousas" and "Father Willis." According to family tradition, strong determination and profound faith were his shields. He would often work barefooted, walking great distances to visit and preach to small groups. He rode logs in order to cross streams or travel downstream. He would sometimes return home from a mission tour as late as one o'clock in the morning and awaken his wife to prepare clothes that he might leave again a few hours later.

By 1818, when Joseph and others founded the Louisiana Baptist Association at Cheneyville, he had been instrumental in founding all five charter member churches. They were Calvary, 1812; Beulah, 1816; Vermillion, 1817; Aimwell, 1817 (also called Debourn); and Plaquemine, 1817. Aimwell was about five-miles southeast of Oberlin, Beulah at Cheneyville, Calvary at Bayou Chicot, Vermillion at Lafayette, and Plaquemine near Branch. In 1824 he

helped establish Zion Hill Church at Beaver Dam along with William Wilbourn and Isham Nettles. He went "far and wide" establishing a church October 21, 1827, just seventeen-miles from Orange, Texas, and the Texas State line near Edgerly, Louisiana named Antioch Primitive Baptist Church.

Joseph kept a diary. These notes were arranged in 1841 by W. P. Ford and copied by Paxton in 1858. Paxton admits most of his facts concerning Central Louisiana Baptists are from this manuscript and Louisiana Association Minutes. This manuscript is lost today. Mr. Ford also made remarks in this manuscript. One of Ford's observations made in 1834 is recorded by Paxton and is very revealing concerning Joseph:

"Nearly all the churches now left in the association were gathered either directly or indirectly by the labors of Mr. Willis. Mr. Ford remarks of this effort: 'It was truly affecting to hear him speak of them as his children; and with all the affection of a father allude to some schisms and divisions that had arisen in the past and to warn them against the occurrence of anything of the kind in the future. But when he spoke of the fact that two or three of them had already become extinct, his voice failed and he was compelled to give utterance to his feelings by his tears; and surely the heart must have been hard that could not be melted by the manifestation of so much affection, for he wept not alone.'

No church ever split while Joseph was its pastor. Baptist historian John T. Christian remarks in his book "A History of Baptist of Louisiana" (1923): "It must steadily be borne in mind that in no other state of the Union have

Baptists been compelled to face such overwhelming odds; and such long and sustained opposition...The wonder is not that at first the Baptists made slow progress, but that they made any at all."

The Opelousas Court House records that Joseph first bought land in Bayou Chicot in 1805. Here, in Bayou Chicot, on June 29, 1809, he sold a slave to Hilaire Bordelon for \$500. Again in June of 1810, he sold another slave for \$480 to Godefrey Soileau. On January 5, 1816 he sold a slave for \$200 to Cesar Hanchett with the provision that this slave would be freed at the age of 32.

On March 10, 1818, Joseph sold 411 acres for \$2,000 to John Montgomery "in the neighborhood of Bayou Chicot." The deed reveals that Joseph had originally purchased this land from John Hays on September 21, 1809. This property had a great deal of improvements on it. On the same day Joseph bought a slave from John Montgomery for \$800.

Other deeds refer to property that Joseph bought while there, such as 148 acres he sold for \$351 to James Murdock on January 6, 1824. This land was part of a tract originally purchased by Joseph from Silas Fletcher on April 20, 1818. He sold the balance of these lands to Thomas Insall on October 31, 1827, for \$500.

Joseph's last sale at Bayou Chicot was the sale of three slaves on August 17, 1829, to James Groves for \$1,500. Thomas Insall paid off a note he owed Joseph on October 11, 1833. These are but a few of Joseph's business transactions while at Bayou Chicot. They confirm religion historian

Benedict's statement, in 1813, that Joseph "spent a large fortune while engaged in the ministry" for all of this money was gone in his later years.

It was at Bayou Chicot that most of his children were born. Miss. Mabel Thompson, of Ville Platte, has in her possession the diary of her great-grandfather who was the schoolteacher in that area. In his diary he listed the patrons of the children who attended school. Joseph Willis is listed as a patron on July 12, 1814.

According to respected Bayou Chicot historian Mabel Thompson. "Chicot's chief attraction was it had an abundance of natural resources, such as timber, good water, wild game, good soil and friendly Indians...Chicot became a trading center for a large territory extending as far West as the Sabine River, serving Indians, trappers, Frontiersmen, homesteaders, as well as plantation owners."

Blessed is the man who has his quiver full of them

Between 1799 and 1802, Joseph's second wife Sarah died. Joseph later remarried a third time and a son was born on January 6, 1804, to this new wife. He was named William Willis and is buried at Humble (formerly called Willis Flats) Cemetery next to the Bethel Baptist Church in Elizabeth, Louisiana. This third wife was probably a Johnson and her given name was probably also Sarah. She was born in South Carolina, but it would seem that Joseph met and married her in Mississippi or Louisiana.

It was to this third wife that many of Joseph's children were born. Along

with William Willis, other children born to this union were Lemuel Willis, born circa 1812 (died 1862); John Willis, born circa 1814, Martha Willis, born April 9, 1825 (four females were listed in the 1830 census between the ages of five and twenty). There is also a Sally Willis listed in the 1850 Rapides Parish census as age forty-eight and living near William Willis. Joseph Jr., William and Lemuel all had daughters named Sarah.

The last two "known children" of Joseph were born to his fourth wife Elvy Sweat. They were Samuel Willis, born circa 1836, and the youngest Aimuewell Willis, born May 1, 1837, and died September 9, 1937. Joseph would have been about 79-years-old when Aimuewell was born. The 1850 Rapides Parish Census also lists additional four males in Joseph Willis' household: James born circa 1841, William born circa 1845, Timothy born circa 1847, and Bernard born circa 1848. It would be unlikely that Joseph would have a second son named William. Aimuewell Willis always said he was Joseph Willis' youngest son. Perhaps these last four males are grandchildren of Joseph or children of Elvy Sweat from a previous marriage. Historian Ivan Wise wrote in "Footsteps of the Flock: or Origins of Louisiana Baptist" (1910) that two sons of Joseph died "poisoned on honey and were buried a half mile from the present town of Oakdale, Louisiana." I have not been able to find their graves.

This third wife died and is buried at Bayou Chicot, but the location of her grave is unknown. This personal tragedy, along with the loss of his other three wives and children, would have destroyed most men. One historian said Joseph Willis had 19 children. Most of Joseph's children, who were still living, followed him when he would later move to Rapides Parish. Many were

neighbors with him as late as 1850 as the census reveals, as well as several grandchildren who were grown by then.

Joseph's eldest child Agerton (sometimes misspelled Edgerton) married Sophie Story, an Irish orphan brought from Tennessee by a Mr. Park, who then lived near Holmesville below Bunkie, Louisiana. Agerton's son, Daniel Hubbard Willis, Sr., was the first of many descendants to follow Joseph into the ministry. Daniel was called by Paxton "one of the most respected ministers in the Louisiana Association." He established many churches himself and was blind in his later years. His daughter would read the scriptures and he would preach. He was pastor of Amiable and Spring Hill Baptist Churches for many years. He was my great-great-grandfather. He settled on Spring Creek, near Glenmora, at a community called Babb's Bridge.

Joseph's daughter Jemima Willis, married William Dyer and they lived on the Calcasieu River near Master's Creek. Joseph's daughter, Mary Willis, married Thomas Dyal/Dial (her first husband was a Johnson) from South Carolina, and they both were living in Rapides Parish in 1850. Rev. Joseph Willis' son Joseph Willis, Jr. married Jennie Coker at Bayou Chicot and later moved to Rapides Parish and settled near Tenmile Creek. Joseph's son, Lemuel Willis, married Emeline Perkins from Tenmile Creek and settled in the Oakdale/Elizabeth area. The late Dr. Greene Strother, Southern Baptist missionary emeritus to China and Malaysia, was a grandson of Lemuel. Joseph's son, William Willis, married Rhoda Strother on the "Darbourn" on the upper reaches of the Calcasieu. Joseph's youngest son, Aimuewell Willis, married twice and settled in Leesville. His first wife was Marguerite Leuemche, and his second wife was Lucy Foshee.

Many of the descendants of these children live in these same areas today. Eight generations have lived in the Forest Hill/Spring Creek area, beginning with Joseph himself. Oakdale, Louisiana probably has more descendants of Joseph than any other area.

I visited with Aimuewell's daughter, Pearl, in Denver, Colorado in December of 1980, and a short time later with Aimuewell's son Elzie Willis, near Leesville, Louisiana. It was a strange feeling to talk with someone whose grandfather was born in the 1750's. Joseph was about 79 when their father was born and, Aimuewell was in his eighties when they were born. No photograph exists of Joseph. The photograph in Durham and Ramond's book, "Baptist Builders in Louisiana" (1934), is of Aimuewell, listed as Joseph in error.

In Service of America

Not surprising, many descendants are Baptists, but far from all are. Many have fought in the major wars and served this country well. Joseph fought in the Revolutionary War. Daniel Hubbard Willis, Jr., Aimuewell Willis, William Willis, Crawford Willis (killed at Shiloh), and Lemuel Willis served in the Civil War for the South. Daniel Oscar Willis, M.D. and Dr. Greene Strother served in World War I. Dr. Greene Strother, Joseph's great-grandson, captured more Germans than any other soldier, besides the famed Sgt. York, in World War I. He was awarded the French Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart. He also served as chaplain to General Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers" while in China as a missionary. A host of

descendants of Joseph Willis fought in World War II including Robert (Bobby) Kenneth Willis, Jr., who was the first soldier killed in action in World War II from Rapides Parish, Louisiana. The Pineville, Louisiana American Legion Post (now closed) was named in his honor. He was killed by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, during the surprised attack on Pearl Harbor. His body is entombed at the bottom of Pearl Harbor aboard the USS Arizona.

After moving to Spring Creek, east of Calcasieu River near Glenmora, Louisiana around 1828/ 1829, Joseph began to establish churches in that area as well. The first church established was Amiable on September 6, 1828, near Glenmora. He next established Occupy Baptist Church in 1833 near Pitkin, and then he established Spring Hill Baptist Church in 1841, near Forest Hill.

Joseph was about 83 when Spring Hill was established and his health was failing. The Baptist churches of that day did not necessarily meet weekly. Preachers would have to travel long distances. Those who met weekly might have a preacher only once a month or every other month. Discipline was stern with members being excluded (fellowship being withdrawn by the church) for gossiping, drinking too much, quarreling, dancing, using bad language and in one case at Amiable, for "having abused her mother." But the churches were also forgiving, if you admitted you were wrong and promised not to do it again. A good example is found in the Spring Hill Church minutes. After twice before promising not to "partake of ardent spirits" any more Robert Snoddy had the fellowship of the church withdrawn from him on May 31, 1851. A month later Snoddy sent this apologetic letter to the church explaining his actions:

"Dear Brethren, Having been overtaken in an error I set down to confess it. I did use liquor to freely, but did not say anything or do anything out of the way. In as much as I do expect to be at the conference I send you my thoughts. I did promise you that I would refrain from using the poison, but I having broken my promise I have therefore rendered myself unworthy of your fellowship and cannot murmur if you exclude me. I suppose it is no use to tell you that I have been sincerely punished for my crime in as much as I have confessed the same to you before but I make this last request of you for forgiveness or is your forgiveness exhausted towards me. It is necessary that I say to you that I sorely repented for my guilt, but my brethren if you have in your wisdom supposed that my life brings to much reproach on that most respectful of all causes, exclude me, exclude me, Oh exclude me. But I do love the cause so well that I will try to be at the door of the temple of the Lord. Brethren whilst you are dealing with me do it mercifully prayerfully and candidly. I was presented by a beloved brother with a temperance pledge to which I replied I would think about it but if I could of obtained enough of my hearts blood to fill my pen to write my name I would have done it. It is my determination to join it yet – and never taste another drop of the deathly cup whilst I live at the peril of my life. Nothing more but I request your prayers dear brethren – Robert Snoddy"

Robert Snoddy was restored to membership. Four-months later he was once again reported drinking and once again excluded.

The Amiable Baptist Church minutes in 1879 declared their position in no uncertain terms:

"On motion be it resolved that we as a church are willing to look over and forgive the past and we as a church for the time to come allow no more playing or dancing among our church members if they do they may expect to be dealt with." The Amiable minutes record that one dear member was admonished at a church service for dancing. He then stood in the church aisle, did a jig and walked out.

Pastors were usually called to preach by the church for a one-year period. In 1857, Amiable voted to give Pastor Daniel H. Willis \$100 "to sustain him for the next twelve months...it being the amount stated by him."

In 1833 Joseph became pastor of Occopy Baptist Church near Pitkin, Louisiana. The church is presently located about one-half mile from Tenmile Creek. He served as pastor there for about 16-years. It was there also that he married his last wife Elvy Sweat, who was many years younger than him. She is listed as age 30 in the 1850 census; Joseph is listed as 98 in the same census. According to family tradition and several historians she was not good to him. As a result of this and Joseph's failing health, his son Lemuel went and got him and took him to his home in Oakdale, where he lived the remainder of his life. On a bed, in an ox wagon used for an ambulance, he sang as the wagon rolled along to Lemuel's home. Lemuel had two men with him too help and Joseph witnessed to them while lying in the back of the wagon. He preached to his last breath, either from a chair in the church or

from his bed at the home.

It was during this time that a man named John Phillips, from the government, came by taking affidavits as to the population's race. Joseph signed this affidavit and stated that his mother was Indian and his father was English. This was registered at the courthouse in Alexandria, Louisiana.

Home Coming in Heaven

Joseph died on September 14, 1854. He is buried at the Occupy Baptist Church cemetery. Twenty-years after he began his ministry in Louisiana there were only ten preachers and eight Baptist churches with a membership of 150 in the entire state. On January 18, 1955, just over 100 years after his death, 250 people along with 16 ministers gathered in freezing weather to unveil a monument in his memory at his grave site.

The Louisiana Association published the following estimate of his work:

"Before the church began to send missionaries into destitute regions, he at his own expense, and frequently at the risk of his life, came to these parts, preaching the gospel of the Redeemer. For fifty years he was instant in season and out of season, preaching, exhorting, and instructing regarding not his property, his health or even his life, if he might be the means of turning sinners to Christ"

Louisiana Baptist historian Glen Lee Greene wrote in "House Upon A Rock"

(1973):

"In all the history of Louisiana Baptists it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a man who suffered more reverses, who enjoyed fewer rewards, or who single-handedly achieved more enduring results for the denomination than did Joseph Willis."

Dedicated To

Lillie Hanks Willis – My grandmother who poured Jesus into my heart and a love of the history of Joseph Willis

and

Dr. Greene Wallace Strother – Cousin and Southern Baptist missionary emeritus to China and Malaysia who encouraged me and passed the torch of the history of Joseph Willis to me

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Randy Willis, P O Box 15345, Austin, Texas 78761 512-251-3212

www.randywillis.org randy@randywillis.org