Willis Williams: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938

Willis Williams: Ex-Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project 1936-1938 Willis Williams of 1025 Iverson Street, Jacksonville, Florida, was born at Tallahassee, Florida, September 15, 1856. He was the son of Ransom and Wilhemina Williams, who belonged during the period of slavery to Thomas Heyward, a rich merchant of Tallahassee. Willis does not know the names of his paternal grandparents but remembers his maternal grandmother was Rachel Fitzgiles, who came down to visit the family after the Civil War.

Thomas Heyward, the master, owned a plantation out in the country from Tallahassee and kept slaves out there; he also owned a fine home in the city as well as a large grocery store and produce house.

Willis mother, Wilhemina, was the cook at the town house and his father, Williams, did carpentry and other light work around the place. He does not remember how his father learned the trade, but presumes that Mr. Heyward put him under a white carpenter until he had learned. The first he remembers of his father was that he did carpentry work.

At the time Willis was born and during his early life, even rich people like Mr. Heyward did not have cook stoves. They knew nothing of such. The only means of cooking was by fireplace, which, as he remembers, was wide with an iron rod across it. To the rod a large iron pot was suspended and in it food was cooked. An iron skillet with a lid was used for baking and it also was used to cook meats and other food. The common name for the utensil was spider and every home had one.

Willis fared well during the first nine years of his life, which were spent in slavery. To him it was the same as freedom for he was not a victim of any unpleasant experiences as related by some other ex-

slaves. He played baseball and looked after his younger brothers and sister while his mother was in the kitchen. He was never flogged but received chastisement once from the father of Mr. Heyward. That, he related, was light and not nearly so severe as many parents give their children today.

Wilhemina, his mother, and the cook, saw to it that her children were well fed. They were fed right from the master's table, so to speak. They did not sit to the table with the master and his family, but ate the same kind of food that was served them.

Cornbread was baked in the Heyward kitchen but biscuits also were baked twice daily and the Negroes were allowed to eat as many as they wished. The dishes were made of tin and the drinking vessels were made from gourds. Few white people had china dishes and when they did possess them they were highly prized and great care was taken of them.

The few other slaves, which Mr. Heyward kept around the town house, tended the garden and the many chickens, ducks and geese on the place. The garden afforded all of the vegetables necessary for feeding Master Heyward, his family and slaves. He did not object to the slaves eating chicken and green vegetables and sent provisions of all kinds from his store to boot.

Although Mr. Heyward was wealthy there were many things he could not buy for Tallahassee did not afford them. Willis remembers that candles were mostly used for light. Homemade tallow was used in making them. The moulds, which were made of wood, were of the correct size. Cotton string twisted right from the raw cotton was cut into desired length and placed in the moulds first, then heated tallow was poured in until they were filled. The tallow was allowed to set and cool, then they were removed, ready for use.

In those days coffee was very expensive and a substitute for it was made from parched corn. The whites used it as well as the slaves.

Willis remembers a man named Pierce who cured cowhides. He used to buy them and one time Willis skinned a cow and took the hide to

him and sold it. Sixty-five and seventy years ago everyone used horses or mules and they had to have shoes. The blacksmith wore leather aprons and the horses and mules wore leather collars. No one knew anything about composition leather for making shoes so the tanning of hides was a lucrative business.

Clothing, during Civil War days and early Reconstruction, was simple as compared to present day togs. Cloth woven from homespun thread was the only kind Negroes had. Every house of any note could boast of a spinning wheel and loom. Cotton, picked by slaves, was cleared of the seed and spun into thread and woven into cloth by them. It was common to know how to spin and weave. Some of the cloth was dyed afterwards with dye made from indigo and polk berries. Some was used in its natural color.

Cotton was the main product of most southern plantations and the owner usually depended upon the income from the sale of his yearly crop to maintain his home and upkeep of his slaves and cattle. It was necessary for every farm to yield as much as possible and much energy was directed toward growing and picking large crops. Although Mr. Heyward was a successful merchant, he did not lose sight of the fact that his country property could yield a bountiful supply of cotton, corn and tobacco.

Around the town house Mr. Heyward maintained an atmosphere of home life. He wanted his family and his servants well cared for and spared no expense in making life happy.

As Willis remembers the beds were made of Florida moss and feathers. Boards were laid across for slats and the mattress placed upon the boards. On top of the moss mattress a feather one was placed which made sleeping very comfortable. In summer the feather mattress was often removed, sunned, aired and replaced in winter. Goose and the downy feathers of chickens were saved and stored in large bags until enough were collected for a mattress and it was considered a prize to possess one.

Every family of note boasted the ownership of a horse and buggy or several of each. The kind most popular during Willis's boyhood was

the one-seated affair with a short wagon-like bed in the rear of the seat. Sometimes two seats were used. The seats were removable and could be used for carrying baggage or other lightweights. The brougham, surrey and landau were unknown to Willis.

Before the Civil War and during the time the great struggle was in full swing, women wore hoop skirts, very full, held out with metal hoops. Pantaloons were worn beneath them and around the ankle where they were gathered very closely, a ruffle edged with a narrow lace, finished them off. The waist was tight fitting basque and sleeves which could be worn long or to elbow, were very full. Women also wore their hair high up on their heads with frills around the face. Negro women, right after slavery, fell into imitating their former mistresses and many of them who were fortunate enough to get employment used part of their earnings for at least one good dress. It was usually made of woolen a yard wide, or silk.

Money has undergone a change as rapidly as some other commonplace things. In Willis's early life, money valued at less than one dollar was made of paper just as the dollar, five dollar or ten dollar bills were. There was a difference however, in the paper representing change and not as much care was taken in protecting it from being imitated. The paper money used for change was called shin plasters and much of it flooded the southland during Civil War days.

Mr. Heyward did not enlist in the army to help protect the south's cause but his eldest son, Charlie, went. His younger son was not old enough to go. Willis stated that Mr. Heyward did not go because he was in business and was needed at home to look after it. It is not known whether Charlie was killed at war or not, but, Willis said he did not return home at the close of war.

When the news of freedom came to Thomas Heyward's town slaves it was brought by McCook's Cavalry. Willis remembers the uniforms worn by the northerners was dark blue with brass buttons and the Confederates wore gray. After the cavalry reached Tallahassee, they separated into sections, each division taking a different part of the town. Negroes of the household were called together and were

informed of their freedom. It is remembered by Willis that the slaves were jubilant but not boastful.

Mr. Heyward was dealt a hard blow during the war; his store was confiscated and used as a commissary by the northern army. When the war ended he was deprived of his slaves and a great portion of his former wealth vanished with their going.

The loss of his wealth and slaves did not bitter Mr. Heyward; to the contrary, he was as kindhearted as in days past.

McCook's Cavalry did not remain in Tallahassee very long and was replaced by a colored company: the 99th Infantry. Their duty was to maintain order within the town. An orchestra was with the outfit and Willis remembers that they were very good musicians. A Negro who had been the slave of a man of Tallahassee was a member of the orchestra. His name was Singleton and his former master invited the orchestra to come to his house and play for the family. The Negroes were glad to render service, want, and after that entertained many white families in their homes.

The southern soldiers who returned after the war appeared to receive their defeat as good sports and not as much friction between the races existed as would be imagined. The ex-slave, while he was glad to be free, wanted to be sheltered under the wings of his former master and mistress. In most cases they were hired by their former owners and peace reigned around the home or plantation. This was true of Tallahassee, if not of other sections of the south.

Soon after the smoke of the cannons had died down and people began thinking of the future, the Negroes turned their thoughts toward education. They grasped every opportunity to learn to read and write. Schools were fostered by northern white capitalists and white women were sent into the southland to teach the colored boys and girls to read, write and figure. Any Negro who had been fortunate enough to gain some knowledge during slavery could get a position as school teacher. As a result many poorly prepared persons entered the school room as tutor.

William Williams, Willis's father, found work at the old Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad yards and worked for many years there. He sent his children to school and Willis advanced rapidly.

During slavery Negroes attended church, sat in the balcony, and very often log churches were built for them. Meetings were held under bush harbors. After the war frame and log churches served them as places of worship. These buildings were erected by whites who came into the southland to help the ex-slave. Negro men who claimed God had called them to preach served as ministers of most of the Negro churches but often white preachers visited them and instructed them concerning the Bible and what God wanted them to do. Services were conducted three times a day on Sunday, morning at eleven, in afternoon about three and at night at eight o'clock.

The manner of worship was very much in keeping with present day modes. Preachers appealed to the emotions of the flock and the congregation responded with amens, halleluia, clapping of hands, shouting and screaming. Willis remarked to one white man during his early life, that he wondered why the people yelled so loudly and the man replied that in fifty years hence the Negroes would be educated, know better and would not do that. He further replied that fifty years ago the white people screamed and shouted that way. Willis wonders now when he sees both white and colored people responding to preaching in much the same way as in his early life if education has made much difference in many cases.

Much superstition and ignorance existed among the Negroes during slavery and early reconstruction. Some wore bags of sulphur saying they would keep away disease. Some wore bags of salt and charcoal believing that evil spirits would be kept away form them. Others wore a silver coin in their shoes and some made holes in the coin, threaded a string through it, attached it to the ankle so that no one could conjure them. Some who thought an enemy might sprinkle goofer dust around their door steps swept very clean around the door step in the evening and allowed no one to come in afterwards.

The Negro men who spent much time around the grannies during

slavery learned much about herbs ad roots and how they were used to cure all manner of ills. The doctor gave practically the same kind of medicine for most ailments. The white doctors at that time had not been schooled to a great extent and carried medicine bags around to the sick room which contained pilled and a very few other kinds of medicines which they had made from herbs and roots. Some of them are used to-day but Willis said most of their medicines were pills.

Ten years after the Civil War Willis Williams had advanced in his studies to the extent that he passed the government examination and became a railway mail clerk. He ran from Tallahassee to Palatka and River Junction on the Florida Central and Peninsular Railroad. There was no other railroad going into Tallahassee then.

The first Negro railway mail clerk according to Willis's knowledge running from Tallahassee to Jacksonville, was Benjamin F. Cox. The first colored mail clerk in the Jacksonville Post Office was Camp Hughes. He was sent to prison for rifling the mail. Willis Myers succeeded Hughes and Willis Williams succeeded Myers. Willis received a telegram to come to Jacksonville to take Myers place and when he came expected to stay three or four days, but, after getting here was retained permanently and remained in the service until his retirement.

His first run from Tallahassee to Palatka and River Junction began in 1875 and lasted until 1879. In 1879 he was called to Jacksonville to succeed Myers and when he retired forty years later, had filled the position creditably, therefore was retired on a pension which he will receive until his death.

Willis Williams is in good health, attends Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church of which he is a member. He possesses all of his faculties and is able to carry on an intelligent conversation on his fifty years in Jacksonville.

Source:
American Life Histories from the Library of Congress
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html