by Jonathan B. Butcher, 6/1982 to Randy Willis

I. Benjamin Willis III

As you know, the first ancestor of your Willis lineage in North Carolina was Benjamin Willis Sr., who came to Bladen Co. ca. 1750, and was likely born in the 1720’s. Following you notation, I will refer to him as Benjamin III. Benjamin seems to have been a brother of Daniel, Agerton and George Willis, and of Joanna, wife of James Council. However, as you know from my correspondence with Randy Willis, the matter of these siblings’ origin is far from settled. One account of their origin is derived from Judson Council’s Hodges Council of Virginia and Descendants. The information therein on James Council is not entirely consistent, but generally shows that James was born in 1716 in Virginia, son of John Council and grandson of Hodges Council of Isle of Wight Co., Va. Hodges came from Devonshire, England, and it is of interest to note that the given name Willis was already found in the Council family while still in England, so perhaps the two families had been long associated. The second (or third) wife of James Council was Joannah Willis (1730-1791), whom he must have married about 1751/2. It is further stated that James’ father, John Council, married "Josie, daughter of Benjamin Willis, both of Isle of Wight Co., Va." I personally feel that this tradition should be approached with some skepticism, for it looks possible that the name of the wife of the father, John, has been confused with the wife of the son, James, by family tradition, as often occurs. I have not been able to document an elder Benjamin Willis in Isle of Wight Co., Va., or indeed any trace of the Bladen Co. Willises there. John Council seems to have lived along the border between Hertford Co., N. C. and Nansemond Co., Va. These are both burned-record counties, and I have not been able to locate a probate record for him, likely because he died in Nansemond Co. (now the City of Suffolk). It may thus be that the ancestor of the Bladen Co. Willises is likewise lost with the early records of Nansemond Co. - but if so it seems likely that the was only briefly resident there, as they do not appear in the Virginia Land Patents. I suspect that the lineage leads quickly back to England one war or another. Quite possibly the tradition regarding Josie Willis is
incorrect, and the Willis brothers may actually have been born in England, as was apparently the tradition among the descendants of Daniel’s son, Gen. John Willis.

Positive references to this Willis family are first found in North Carolina in 1752. Benjamin Willis was in Bladen Co., by 10 Oct. 1751 when he had a warrant for a grant of 100 acres on the north side of Drowning Creek (now Lumbar River) at Saddletree Swamp, which was issued 31 Mar. 1753 (Bladen Co Grand #1113, no plat survives). Then on 3 March 1756 he had a tract of 500 acres surveyed on the west side of North West River, joining Daniel Willis, which was issued 17 Mar. 1756 (Bladen Co, #1438, see photostats). Chain bearers for the survey were James Ellis and Thomas Shearman. The Bladen tax of 1784 lists Benjamin Willis Sen. with 2000 acres land, 2 white polls and 8 slave polls. On 29 Sep. 1785 he made a deed of gift of a negro named Phillis to his daughter, Ann Willis, "reserving the use of said negro to her mother Sarah Willis." (Bladen deeds 7:421).

Benjamin’s eldest son, Benjamin IV, served in the Continental Line during the Revolution. Benjamin Sr. also provided assistance to the cause, although it is impossible to tell if some records refer to Benjamin III or Benjamin IV. We do find one original Revolutionary voucher preserved that is clearly directed to "Benja. Willis Senr." from the Auditors for Wilmington District, which included Bladen Co. This was for 15 pds., numbered 1258 (see copy enclosed). We find this recorded in the Revolutionary Army Accounts, Book V, p. 51., f.2, in a section entitled "Report of the Several Claims allowed...for the District of Wilmington from the 17th Oct. 1781 to the 15th Jul.1783." Voucher 1258 is listed as a Militia Claim, but this does not mean it was necessarily for active service as it might be for supplies provided to the Militia (it is not possible to tell from the entry). The next voucher, #1259, is also listed for "Benj. Willis", for 25 pds., and may also refer to Benjamin Sr., although the original does not survive. Both these vouchers were paid back into the Treasury on account of taxes due in
Wilmington District, the 15 pd. voucher being reported in Bk. XI, p.92, f.4 and the 25 pd. voucher in Bk VI, p.80, f.2.

Since Benjamin IV appears to have served in the regular army throughout the war, it is likely that several claims for militia service also refer to Benjamin, Sr. A copy of voucher #2935, explicitly directing payment of 20 pds. 14 she. to Benjamin Willis for Militia service in Wilmington District, in enclosed. Issuance of this voucher is recorded in the Revolutionary Army Accounts, Bk. W, No.1 (vol. 48), p.92, and the voucher was paid back into the Treasury by the Entry Taker of Bladen Co. (Bk. VI, p.24, f.2). Other vouchers, likely in payment for requisitioned supplied, might refer to either Benjamin.

While maintaining his residence in Bladen Co., Benjamin also obtained and in the area soon created as Robeson Co. On 22 June 1771 he had surveyed 500 acres in the Horse Neck, which was issued on 22 May 1772 (Bladen #2126). Chain carriers for the survey were Benjamin Willis and Agerton Willis, Jr., two of his sons. Benjamin Willis Sr. then entered tracts of 100 and 200 acres southwest of Gaulberry Swamp and in Horse Neck on 18-19 Nov. 1779, which were both issued 7 Nov. 1784 (Bladen #4083, 4181). Chain carriers for these surveys were Joseph Willis and Archd. Bone. Benjamin Willis IV also obtained land adjacent, and it is difficult to determine which Benjamin was the recipient of several of the grants.

Benjamin III died in Fall of 1785, and the Bladen tax of 1788 lists "Willis, Benjamin, Estate" with 1562 acres and 4 slave polls. He apparently left a will, which is not preserved, for on a list of suits brought in Bladen Co. Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions in Nov. 1786 is record of a case Wm. Toler vs. Sarah Willis & Benjn. Willis, Exrs. of Benjamin Willis (N. C. Treasurer & Comptroller’s Papers, County Settlements with the State, Box 21: Bladen Co.). Although the will is lost, the surviving deeds show that he left a widow Sarah and a number of children, including a son named Joseph who has been confused with
his cousin, mulatto Joseph. We first find the widow releasing her right in the slave Phillis:

(Bladen Co. deeds 38:388): Know all men by these presents that I Sarah Willis of

the County of Bladen & State of North Carolina for the five shillings by me received of & from Ann Willis of the same place...do hereby...sell...unto the said Ann Willis...a negro girl named Phillis daughter of Tymon Cooper... ...In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & seal this 25th day of Oct. 1785. (signed) SARAH WILLIS

JAMES STONE

AGERTON WILLIS

Witness: Benjamin Willis

Apparently James Stone and Agerton Willis also had received some claim to the slave. We also find that Sarah made the following agreement to secure payment of a debt incurred by her son, Benjamin IV:

(Bladen 1:465): Know all men by these presents that I Sarah Willis of Bladen County...for...one hundred and twenty pounds ten shillings money of the aforesaid state...paid...by Samuel Carver of Bladen County...have...sold...two negroes named John and Jim...the abovename two negroes to work with him till he saws timber at Benjamin Willis’ or shall have them a seasonable time to provide the lumber as much at Market price as will discharge a debt of one hundred and twenty pounds ten shillings Due from Benjamin Willis to him the said Samuel Carver for his trouble...in
sawing such Lumber then this writing shall be void and of no effect... this...the thirtieth day of May...1787.

Witness: John Elwell

Jeremiah Willis

A part of Benjamin III’s lands apparently crossed the line into Cumberland Co., and his widow, Sarah Willis, is listed there on the 1790 Census. Benjamin’s sons were apparently joint heirs to this land, and their identity is proven by a deed of release of 1792:

(Cumberland Co. deeds, 13:344): To all to whom these presents shall come we Benjamin, Jeremiah, David & Richard Willis all of the County of Cumberland & State of North Carolina send greeting where as the said Benjn., Jerh., David and Richard Willis...for...Forth eight pounds to us paid...presents have...sold...unto the sd Agerton a tract or parcel of land situate on the So. side of Cape Fear River a piece above the mouth of Willis’s Creek...Beginning at a___on the side of the river Joseph T? corner...being...88 acres in all...except...6 acres of it for our Mother Sarah Willis near the bridge...In witness whereof I have hereunto set our hand & seals in the year of our Lord 1792 the 9th day of March. (signed) Benjamin Willis

Jeremiah Willis

David Willis

Richard Willis
2. Benjamin Willis IV

Benjamin IV, as you note, was likely born around 1750 and must have first married about 1773, although no record has been found. Georgia records apparently prove the identity of his eldest son as Benjamin V (1773-1860). This however presents certain problems in interpreting the North Carolina records. There seems to have been only this one Benjamin Willis in this generation. However, a 1782 partial tax return of Bladen Co. gives on "A List of Single Men in Bladen County" the name Benjamin Willis Junr. The poll tax in this year was assessed only on unmarried men over 21, suggesting that Benjamin IV was then unmarried. Further, the 1790 Census lists him in Cumberland Co. with a household consisting of 1 white male over 16, none under 16, 3 white females and 1 slave - this is, not accounting for Benjamin V, then aged 15-16. In 1800, as we will see below, Benjamin IV was in Robeson Co. The census of that year (see copy) lists him as over age 45, but with three young children and a wife aged 26-45. I think that these records together suggest that Benjamin IV had son, Benjamin V, by an early first marriage, but was widowed, and this single in 1782. He may than have remarried around 1785-87. Perhaps Benjamin V was living with his grandmother in 1790, as Sarah Willis’ house in that year included a male under age 16, who seems a little young to be her own son.

While Benjamin IV may have been single in 1782 he clearly was of age and owned land well before this. His first identifiable entry in the Land Grant Office ("Benja. Willis Junr.") was made on 14 Nov. 1779 for 500 acres in the Horse Neck on the south side of Gaulberry Swamp and the Watering Branch. This was issued 7 Nov. 1784 and joined lands of James Council, and, apparently, Benjamin Willis, Sr. (Bladen #1482, see cop
enclosed). Chain carriers for the survey were Joseph Willis and Archibald Bone. He was also apparently the Benjamin Willis who received the following grants:

**Bladen #5370**: 200 acres, north side of the Marsh, entered 19 Nov. 1779, issued 19 Nov. 1779.

**Bladen #5372**: 60 acres east of Gaulberry Swamp, entered 31 Oct. 1784 and issued 30 Nov. 1801.

**Bladen #5976**: 300 acres on north side of Gaulberry Swamp, entered 6 Apr. 1801, issued 30 Mar. 1805.

**Robeson #1940**: 200 acres south side of Gaulberry Swamp, entered 19 Nov. ? duplicate warrant issued 7 June 1803, granted 17 Dec. 1804 (see copy).

This time Benjamin IV was called Benjamin Sr., his own son Benjamin being grown. Chain carriers are not listed on this survey.

The surviving 1784 tax of Bladen lists Benjamin Willis Jr. (IV) next to Benjamin Willis Sr. (III), in Capt. Burns’ District, with taxable property consisting of 1400 acres land and 1 white poll, no slaves. This 1788 tax lists Benjamin Willis, next to the listing for Benjamin Sr.’s estate, with only 500 acres. This reduction is at least in part due to the fact that much of his land on the south side of Gaulberry was set off into the new county of Robeson in 1787; however Benjamin seems to have still resided in Bladen at this time, where he was serving as executor of his father’s estate.

Benjamin Willis IV served in the North Carolina Continental Line (regular troops) for the entire period of the Revolution, seven years, does not appear on the one surviving roster of the N. C. Line, but this was admittedly incomplete when compiled. However, as a regular soldier he was entitled to a bounty land warrant for land in what is now Tennessee. In "A List of Warrants Issued to the Officers and Soldiers in the
Continental Line Raised in & Belonging to the State of North Carolina" we find: 3249, Willis, Benjamin, Pvt. 640 acres (for) 84 mo. service, Warrant (dated Dec. 17, 1785) delivered to Jno. Price.

Benjamin’s service is also documented in the Revolutionary Army Account Books. In a section entitled "Statement of the Non Commissioned officers and Privates of the late North Carolina line...settled in Warrenton in the year 1786" (R.A.A. Bk. 6, p. 45. f.4) we find that Benjamin Willis received voucher 1743 in pay, although he "never appears on muster." His pay account came to $524.12, of which $59.76 was already credited to him, leaving a balance of $464.22 (the original voucher does not survive, and only typed, certified copies can be made from the Account Books, at $5.00 each). R.A.A. Bk. III, p.100 f3 and "Book of Settlements...No. 28 (Vol. 52), p. 107 show that the certificate, converted to old currency, was issued to Benjamin in the amount of 185 pds., 14 she. Various other vouchers, likely for supplies, may refer to either Benjamin Sr. or Jr.

Some of Benjamin IV’s inherited lands apparently lay just over the border into Cumberland Co., near where Cumberland, Bladen and Roberson all meet. As we saw above he was in Cumberland at the time of the 1790 Census and with his brothers sold land there in 1792. Robeson deeds show that on 3 Dec. 1793 Benjamin Willis of Cumberland Co. sold to William McMillen of Robeson tracts of 100 and 125 acres on Gaulberry Swamp, at least one of which must have been derived from his father as David Willis also signed (E:71), witnessed by Neill McMillen, Thomas McMillen). The land on which Benjamin lived in Cumberland seems to have been jointly owned with his brother Agerton, and may have been inherited from his uncle, Agerton Willis Sr. He last appears in the Cumberland Co. deeds as follows:

(17:357:): North Carolina Cumberland County. To all to whom these presents shall come we Benjamin & Agerton Willis of the State & County above written, Sawyers, send greeting know ye that we the said
Benjamin & Agerton Willis for...thirty five pounds...paid by Joseph Theams... have...sold...unto the aforesaid Joseph Theams a certain tract or parcel of land lying...on the west side of the No W. River Beginning in Theams upper line on the river running thence No 6 E 11 Chain...Containing 35 acres it being part of a survey of 640 acres bearing date Oct. 20th 1728 Including the orchard where Agerton Willis formerly lived... In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & seal this 21st day of Febry in the year of our Lord 1799.

(signed) BENJAMIN WILLIS

AGERTON WILLIS

Witness: Jona. Theams, Josep Beard

By the 1800 Census Benjamin was living on his lands in Roberson Co., perhaps with his second family, as state above. We find that he sold 200 acres there in Horse Neck to Archibald McMillen on 30 Dec. 1795 (E:409). We do not however find later sales recorded for him in Robeson - even though we know that he obtained land grants there as late s 17 Dec. 1804. Unfortunately no Robeson taxes or later Bladen taxes survive to show the later course of his land holdings. I suspect however that he sold all his lands, both in Bladen and Robeson, by a now lost Bladen Co. deed made soon after his last Bladen land grant, dated 30 Mar. 1805. As we will see below, Benjamin V also sold land at this time, so the move to Georgia likely occurred in or soon after 1805.

I have not found any clues to identify the children of Benjamin IV’s (apparent) second marriage, but these seem to have consisted of:

i. daughter, born before 1790

ii. daughter, born 1784/90.

iii. daughter, born 1790/1800.
iv. daughter, born 1790/1800.

v. son, born 1790/1800.

3. Benjamin Willis V.

According to your notes Benjamin V was born in Cumberland Co. in 1774, probably on the land his father owned just over the line from Bladen Co. Benjamin V must have married just before the 1800 Census, which lists him in Bladen, aged 16-26, with a wife but no children. His wife, Blansett, was a daughter of John Morrison of Bladen Co. John Morrison made his will in Bladen on 28 Mar. 1801, naming as heirs his wife Flora, daughter Marion, son Kenneth, son-in-law Benjamin Willis and grandsons Daniel Campbell and Neill Morrison Executors were John Campbell and Duncan Campbell; witnesses A. H. Bride, Jeremiah Willis and Benjamin Willis. The will is recorded in the Bladen will books, but the original does not survive.

Benjamin V. apparently obtained land from his father-in-Las via a now lost deed. As "Benj. Willis Junr. of Bladen" he sold to Neill McMillen for 75 pds. on 16 May 1805 50 acres on the east side of the Great Swamp, conveyed to him "from Morrison" (Bladen 27:289, witnessed by James Moore, Neill McMillan). This deed probably dated the family’s move to Georgia.