How old was Joseph Willis when he died? What year was he born? Why does Joseph Willis' tombstone have the wrong year of birth on it? Joseph Willis' uncle Daniel Willis petitioned North Carolina's Governor Caswell on October 10, 1777, in an attempt to overthrow his brother and Joseph Willis' father Agerton Willis' will.

Daniel Willis wrote in his letter to Governor Caswell, "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..."

Joseph Willis was not of legal age as of the date of his father Agerton Willis' will, September 18, 1776. Legal age was then 21 in North Carolina therefore Joseph Willis 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 Willis was writing to the Governor and Council instead.

Therefore what year was Joseph Willis born and how old was he when he died? The answer is 1758 and 96 respectively.

That's the date his son Aimpewell Willis said and other descendants that were alive during Joseph Willis' lifetime. It is also the date Durham and Ramond wrote in Baptist Builders in Louisiana (1934), on page 14, and other early writers including Ivan Wise in Footsteps of the Flock: or Origins of Louisiana Baptist (1910) on page 72 and other pages.

John T. Christian wrote in his book A History of Baptist of Louisiana (1923), on page 50, that Joseph Willis was born "1758 or, 1762." The reason, I'm sure, he added the year of 1762 was that the Louisiana Baptist Association minutes quoted the committee on his obituary for them in 1854 as saying that he died "at the advanced age of NINETY
TWO." Ivan Wise had also mentioned this quote from the minutes on page 72 of his book. I believe they were off four years and I also believe the Louisiana Baptist Association quote two years earlier (*see below) was accurate. If not he fought with Francis Marion in the Revolutionary War at age 14 and his own son was wrong on his year of birth as well as many others.

The Louisiana Baptist Association minutes in 1852 said that he was then, "a feeble old man of ninety-four" thus making his year of birth 1758 and his age at death 96.

So why was his year of birth carved into his tombstone for the January 18, 1955, dedication at Occupy Baptist Church listed as 1764. The answer is I don't know!

The 1850 Rapides Parish Census list his age as 98, but these are often incorrect since they're given by whomever at the residence was willing to "guess" at everyone’s age. It was the first census in America to list ages and I’m sure no one was thinking that these numbers would someday matter to historians and genealogist. In fact many at that time were illiterate.

I now just list his year of birth as 1758. I think that “circa 1758” would be acceptable too.

I hope this helps a little.

- Randy Willis