

## **Will & Estelle Wiggins: A European & Cherokee Legacy**

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William Watauga Wiggins and Estelle Corinne Roberts were married on 22 October 1904. From these two families sprang an enduring European and Cherokee history.

In Bryson City Cemetery, one will find their headstones near the edge of Hillside Drive on the ridge overlooking the city. Their respective ancestors' grave sites are spread about the southern states but their three children share the same plot along with Will's sister and brother-in-law, Bland and Jack Coburn. Bland purchased the family plot from A.J. and Sallie Keener Franklin in June, 1928.



### **Will Wiggins: Ancestry & Legacy**

Will Wiggins was born 17 April 1877 in Boone, N.C. His great, great-grandfather, Garland Wiggins, was a Revolutionary War veteran. (Arthur 1914, 212). Somewhat more is known about his grandfather, Abraham Wiggins Jr., a longtime resident of Graham County who moved there from the Alarka community in 1840.

“Abe” and Margaret (Peggy) Wiggins amassed a great deal of property during that decade in the Robbinsville area. Before the move, Abe and Peggy had been on good terms with area Cherokee and developed relationships. The established story of Tsali finds a place within the family. When Tsali made his famous command decision to risk it all by escaping Cherokee removal in 1838, he had an encounter at the Wiggins cabin:

It was at the home of Abraham Wiggins, on Alarka that Tsali ate his last meal. Abraham Wiggins was a close relative of Will Thomas. Margaret Wiggins, wife of Abraham served food to the entire party. She insisted on holding prayer service in the clearing. (“The Cherokee in Graham County”)

This online excerpt from the Graham County Centennial Book from 1872-1972 supports the oral tradition of the author's family. Somewhere, in the unfortunate chaos of family treasures, is the menu Peggy Wiggins jotted down when preparing food for Tsali, his family, and friends. (Byrd 2012) Abe Wiggins, in addition, helped establish Old Mother Church in Graham County, which sits next to Old Mother Cemetery, where he, Peggy, and many other family members are buried. Like Bryson City Cemetery, it sits on a lovely hill with a beautiful view. Abe was responsible for much of the Methodist infusion into the family system.

Will was born to Rev. Joseph and Mary Jane Hayes Wiggins, the fourth of eight children (George, the eldest, died in infancy). As with Garland Wiggins, Jane's great-grandfather, Edward Hayes, also served in the Revolutionary War (Arthur 1914, 212). Moreover, Jane's family also had strong roots in the North Carolina Mountains, doing much for their communities. Hayesville, N.C. was named for her father, George W. Hayes (Arthur 1914, 211).



Rev. Joe Wiggins family, circa 1904. Standing, L-R: Nina Gertrude, William Watauga, Walter Brown, Elizabeth, Ira, Bland. Seated, L-R: Katherine (probably with daughter May on lap), Rev. Joe, Mary Jane Hayes Wiggins.

Rev. Joseph Alexander Wiggins was born in what is now Swain County on 3 March 1832, the fourth of Abe and Peggy's children, and moved to Graham County with his family as a boy. According to his obituary, taken from an unidentified Western North Carolina newspaper:

He professed faith in Christ in the year of 1856, was licensed to preach and joined the Holston Conference of the M.E. Church in the year of 1859. He was appointed at that Conference to the Cleveland circuit, in the State of Tennessee, and served that work until 1861 when he enlisted in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Tenn. Cavalry, and served the entire four years as Chaplin [sic] of this Confederate Regiment. (Smathers)

Much of the family oral tradition revolved around yarn that went something like, “Did you know that your great, great grandfather was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher?” Joe’s ordained duties were less well-known at the time. The later discovery that he was also a cavalry chaplain was personally rewarding for one that had served as a police officer and later a hospital chaplain. Civil War chaplains were a breed apart. Usually in the thick of things, clergy from the period had to demonstrate grit usually not seen in contemporary chaplains:

Being a chaplain was a very difficult task, and more complicated than pastoring a local church. The physical as well as spiritual being was stretched to the limits. A chaplain had to press on regardless of whether he felt like it or not. As shall become evident the chores of chaplains were usually extensive: from teaching a Bible class to caring for a dead body ... Men were reluctant to leave their congregations to enter an aspect of service that was not organized and where there were more questions than answers. How were they going to feed their families? What was the proper protocol? (Rumburg 2005)

According to Smathers, to say that Rev. Joe was zealous in his ministry would be an understatement:

He was a man with an iron jaw. He knew no compromise with evil in any form. The early days of his ministry were especially heroic. His life was often threatened and sometimes attempted. He was never known to turn back in the face of danger. Though being often notified that if he came again into certain communities he would be killed, he never failed to go ... In his last days he thanked God that none of his children ever dishonored him, and that none of them had ever suffered hunger during the years of his Ministry ... His salary was always pitifully small ... He never murmured or complained of his lot. He died full of Faith in a good old age. Blessed be his memory.

Whatever one may say about his theological and ministerial leanings, he was not lacking in tenacity. Joe, like his parents, had positive relationships with the Cherokee. The story of Junaluska saving Andrew Jackson’s life at Horseshoe Bend is well-known. In time, the State of North Carolina granted him citizenship and land in Graham County. He died 20 November 1858, and in 1910 the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a monument to his memory and hundreds of people showed for the ceremony (“The Cherokee in Graham County”). Listed as giving personal reminiscences of Junaluska were Rev. Armstrong Cornsilk, pastor of Cherokee Church and Rev. Joseph Wiggins of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. Joe’s decades of preaching took him throughout Western North Carolina and Virginia, his last charge returning him to Robbinsville. Rev. Joe lived to be 88, consistent with the flavor of the Wiggins line.

Again, Will was the eldest surviving Wiggins son. Walter, four years younger, followed. Ira, who died in the Spanish-American War, was the youngest. Walt was quite popular throughout Robbinsville,

Bryson City, and the other small towns of the area. A 1910 federal census record lists Will as a lumber inspector in High Point Ward 1, Guilford County (1910 U.S. Census, Guilford County, N.C.). Much of his time during the next 20 years was taken up in farming and real estate and his vocation would vary somewhat in the ensuing years but perhaps his most productive time came during the 1930's after being trained as a civil engineer.

He had gone to work for the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) during the period when Swain County relinquished most of its private land to the government. As the newly-created Fontana Lake flooded the landscape – especially Highway 288 – he knew many of his neighbors would suffer, and he was particularly frustrated with the knowledge that so many would not have access to their ancestors' gravesites. The North Shore Drive/Road to Nowhere problem stuck with Will for the rest of his life. He had been directed by his superiors at the TVA to be one of the unlucky ones tasked with notifying citizens that they would be displaced to make way for Fontana and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. When many of these same people learned that access to ancestral lands was compromised, it left him heartbroken. "They'll never build that road," he lamented numerous times to his grandson (the author's father), and, of course, they never did.

One of the great tragedies of Will's life occurred on 14 May 1928, when his and Estelle's eldest child, Mildred Corinne, died in Georgia while visiting family. She had been struck by a baseball and the family story has it that the lump it caused soon turned malignant. Whether that was the case or the injury merely alerted doctors to an existing tumor is unclear. In any event, Mildred, the last enrolled Cherokee in the family's Rogers-to-Roberts line, was greatly missed and fondly spoken of by the family in the years to come. It might be noted here that Mildred was buried more than a month before her Aunt Bland purchased the family plot from A.J. and Sallie Keener Franklin. The deferral of the real estate transaction implicitly reveals a compassion and sensitivity on the part of the Franklins to their Wiggins family friends. It is but one of many such examples of the prevailing sense of community of the day.

Another horrific event for the Wiggins family happened on 30 November 1934, when Will's oldest sister Margaret (Bettie), his sister Bland, and her husband and Will's long-time friend and business partner Jack Coburn, were killed when their car swerved to avoid a truck in the Nantahala River area. On Bettie's death certificate, under the category "accident, suicide, or homicide" the coroner lists it as an accident, with the cause of death being drowning. However, under "manner of injury" he wrote "Forced off road by truck." (N.C. Death Certificates, 1909-1975) Online conversations with Don Casada have begged the question: Is there more to this story?

Will managed to pass on a love of the mountains and its tight-knit communities and at the same time a healthy disrespect of broken government promises. His grandson, Walt ("Wally") spoke of hunting squirrels with Will for food during the Great Depression or there would be "no meat on the table." It was obvious he loved his grandfather very much.

"Daddy Man" Wiggins died on 13 August 1948 in Bryson City at the age of 71.

### **Estelle Roberts Wiggins: Ancestry & Legacy**

Estelle Corinne Roberts, the second of four daughters born to Alexander Pitcairn Roberts—son of Alexander Pinkney Roberts—and Emma Elizabeth Lenoir, was born 11 March 1884 in Georgia. In fact, three Roberts brothers married three Lenoir sisters! A “mixed-blood” Cherokee, Estelle’s American Indian family history is rooted in what are now the Johns Creek/Duluth/Gwinnett/Forsyth areas of Georgia, then part of the old Cherokee Nation. In addition, Estelle was third cousin to Cherokee humorist Will Rogers.



Sisters Mary, Estelle, Francis, and Lucie Roberts, circa 1900

Her great, great-grandmother, Soniovee—Christian name “Susannah”—Cordery [nee Sonicooie] was a clan matriarch who reared eight children by Thomas Cordery (Shadburn, 1993, 98). Susannah, daughter Sarah, granddaughter Annie, and great-granddaughter Emma are all listed in the genealogical section of Starr’s *History of the Cherokee Indians* (391, 393). The section of the old Cherokee Nation that is now northern Georgia was home to many from the Blind Savannah clan, a specific faction of the Wild Potato clan. The John Rogers, Jr. family was a prominent household and despite being one of the many slaveholders of the day, Rogers—a Cherokee by virtue of his marriage to Sarah (Sally) Cordery—was a devout Christian who helped Sarah raise 12 children to adulthood, a rare thing for the time. John and Sarah’s ninth child, Annie, married John W. Lenoir of the Lenoir family which in time became well-known throughout North Carolina thanks to patriarch General William Lenoir and his Fort Defiance. The City of Lenoir, N.C. and its original county seat were named for him. (“Early History”)

Annie Chappel ["chapel"] Rogers Lenoir was enrolled on every major Cherokee census in the east during the 1800's. She saw to it that she and her children were placed on the rolls as they came up, including the Chapman roll, Siler roll, Hester roll, Indian Territory (I.T.) citizenship rolls of the 1880's, and Dawes roll. She owned land in Chelsea, I.T. until her death and the disposition of that land is not clear. In Estelle Wiggins's 1907 Guion Miller application as an Eastern Cherokee, responding to the questions "Have you ever been enrolled for money, annuities, land or other benefits? If so, state when and where, and with what tribe of Indians?" she was informative about the politics of the time:

Am a citizen by blood, but have no land in the Cherokee Nation, I.T., for the reason that the commissioners to the Five Civilized Tribes claims that I went to the Territory too late to establish my citizenship & secure land in the Territory ... I claim through my grand-uncle Love Rogers, through Uncle Henry Lenoir and grandmother Anne C. Lenoir [nee Rogers]. ("Estelle R. Wiggins")

In the same application, a letter from Will Wiggins on behalf of his wife and daughter is included with the following letterhead:

**Wiggins & Coburn**  
**Real Estate & Notary Public**  
**Bryson City, N.C.      July 15, 1907**

Special Commissioner of the Court of Claims,  
601 Curay Building, Washington, D.C.,

My dear Sir:

You will find inclosed [sic] herewith application of my wife, Estelle Roberts Wiggins, and our daughter. You will note that the claim for the two are made out on one blank. If this is not regular you will please notify me and send me blank and I will have them made out separate. You will please send me two more blanks as my wife has two sisters that want to make out claims. I am,

Yours truly,  
Will W. Wiggins  
(signed)

Estelle's application is due at least in part to her grandmother's persistence and devotion to carrying forward the Cherokee heritage. John and Ann Lenoir lived in several locations in Georgia and once owned a farm located on what became the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park on the Georgia/Tennessee line. (Hickerson 1940, 109) Furthermore, Annie's sister, Mary Rogers McNair (Estelle's great aunt) went west from Tennessee with her family and survived the Trail of Tears (Farrell, circa 1977). Once again, the family oral tradition is supported, evidenced by pay vouchers

turned in by Lt. Edward Deas of the U.S. Army in 1839, referring to wagons donated by Mary's husband, Nicholas Byers McNair:

Hired & Paid for by me as stated in the appended vouchers, and that the said wagons were employed under my observation in hauling for the Treaty Party (so called) of Cherokees, which emigrated under my superintendence ... commenced on the 11 Oct 1838 & ending on the 7 January 1839. (Shadburn 2012, 217)

Following the death of her husband and youngest daughter, Emma, Annie C. Lenoir migrated to Indian Territory to be with Cherokee family members who chose to claim their Native American status and take land there. She died 3 March 1901 in Chelsea, Cherokee Nation, and is buried in Chelsea Cemetery.

Estelle's birth mother, Emma, died during one of the worst influenza pandemics in history. She passed on 28 July 1890 at the age of 31, when Estelle was six. She is buried in Duluth Church Cemetery in Duluth, Georgia. Thanks to her mother, Emma was enrolled on several Cherokee census rolls, including the 1883 Hester roll (Blankenship 1992, 98). Alex Roberts soon remarried the former Susan Levisay, for whom the author's aunt is named. Susan was apparently well-liked within the family and took the responsibility for raising a blended family. Roberts moved the family from Georgia to Swain County where he managed the Nantahala Talc Mine in what was then considered Hewitts. Estelle and Will were married on the front porch of "Daddy Roberts's" house. A family tale of Will's exploits in their Bryson City home bears mention: At one point, Will had a collection of bottled "brew" in the basement. On that day there was a thunderous explosion from below that had Estelle calling down, "Will! What's going on down there?" The bottles had become heated, the pressure mounted, and the corks blew Will's "formula" all over the place!

Following Will's death, Estelle moved to Florida and worked for a time in the Ft. Lauderdale area making and sewing dresses for women bound for cruise ship ventures. "Mama Wiggins" later returned, however, and lived her final years in Bryson City, passing on 21 June 1962.

Estelle's second child, Aileen Wiggins [Jackson] Farrell (the author's grandmother) was born in Bryson City on 1 August 1907. She had a short-lived marriage to Walter Jacob ["Jake"] Jackson, of Georgia. After attending business school in Georgia, where she met Jake, they had a son, Walter Coburn Jackson (named for family friend Jack Coburn), on 11 May 1928. Following her separation from Jake, Aileen returned to Bryson City. Later she married Frank Farrell and in 1938 Walt's half-sister, Susan, was born. Frank served in WWII and as America began its recovery, Frank opened a restaurant in Cherokee where the family lived for a time above the kitchen. During those years in Cherokee, the author's Aunt Susan—then a teenager—was a dancer in the timeless presentation, "Unto These Hills." According to Susan, Frank and Aileen at one point received the then-popular Duncan Hines recommendation for quality (Byrd 2012). Aileen eventually retired from the State of North Carolina and, following in the footsteps of her mother, relocated to Florida, making her home in Port Charlotte. She died there and her ashes were returned to Bryson City Cemetery for burial.

Will and Estelle's youngest, Eleanor, married and had no children. She and her husband, William Heyward, lived for many years in Asheville. She died in Port Charlotte, Florida in 1975. Both she and her husband are interred in Bryson City Cemetery.

### **Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond:**

Walt Jackson had a difficult, fragmented life. As early as 1930, at just under two years of age, he is listed on the federal census as a boarder of the Fryemont Inn in the care of Amos and Lilian Frye (1930 U.S. Census, Swain County, N.C.) Because of the extraordinary times, it's difficult to say why he was there but it is clear that many took a turn rearing him. In his final years Walt would return to stay at the Fryemont but would speak little about it. Again, Walt loved his grandparents very much and in addition to adopting some of his "Granddaddy's" values, he also absorbed a great deal of his grandmother's pride and loyalty in being Cherokee by blood.

He had a recorded IQ of 180 and due to this and his Georgia Military Academy experience as a youth he was offered an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Because of a deep desire to instead become a naval pilot, he turned down the West Point offer. The navy's V12 college training program was still underway and Walt was told that a new flight training program had been created, allowing for entrance after just two years of midshipman school. According to Walt, he showed at the induction center where his group was taken into a separate room and told that the program had been canceled. For Walt, it was yet another road to nowhere....

Walt was eventually drafted for the Korean War. He mentioned one time his surprise that the U.S. was also fighting the Chinese during this period. Having overcome yet more obstacles, he later went to work for AT&T's Southern Bell, retiring in 1983. He also became increasingly active in the Episcopal Church, in time directing his church's food pantry for those in need. Walt died 26 May 2007 and is interred with his wife, Jean, in the memorial garden of the former St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Charlotte.

The author and his sisters were introduced to the sacred but strikingly cold waters of Deep Creek during the 1960's. An occasional stop in Cherokee was made but most trips were holiday visits by way of Asheville, where time was spent with a wonderful maternal grandmother as well. Trips to Bryson City became less frequent due to Aileen's relocation to Florida. A great deal of the Wiggins/Rogers/Roberts family history was discussed during Aileen's visits to Charlotte from the Sunshine State. The author sat in on conversations with his mother and Aileen during which much oral tradition (as well as some extensive notes) were transacted. On one such visit Aileen demonstrated a family recipe for potato soup, a variation of which the author enjoys today. *Wild Potato soup...*

In later years, the author found a heartfelt Wiggins bond via a seminary education and his own ordination. A transgenerational legacy of preaching and (more enjoyably) pastoral care and counseling continued. As for the Rogers-Roberts legacy, the writer considers it a great honor to hold life membership in the First Families of the Cherokee Nation and enjoys active participation in a Cherokee Nation satellite community, the Mt. Hood Cherokees.

Will and Estelle Wiggins had much to go on in the way of ancestry and hopefully have left much to be carried on in terms of legacy. Bryson City Cemetery's occupants still have stories to tell. May we have ears to hear them!

## **Acknowledgements**

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My thanks to Don Casada for his friendship, information-gathering, information-sharing, and for being the true "Spirit of Swain."

Mr. Don Shadburn, author of *Unhallowed Intrusion* and *Upon Our Ruins*. Chapters 5 & 6 of the former are essentially about our Cherokee line, and it was a gift of God that Don entered my life. Don, a true gentleman, died on my birthday in 2015, and he is missed. Wah doh (thank you), my friend; rest in peace.

Finally, to the Friends of Bryson City Cemetery for the continued care of BCC and its headstones. Know that family members from afar are grateful.

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