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## Ron Downing: Former slave, descendants leave indelible mark on West Monroe

By Ron Downing May 10, 2017

Born into slavery in 1847 on the Ouachita Parish plantation of William and Mary Oliver, Morris Willis left a legacy in West Monroe that will be visible for many years to come.

His obituary on Sept. 15, 1906 read: "Morris Willis, colored, died yesterday evening after a short illness. Morris has been in the employ of the Southern Grocer Company for years, in fact having been in the employ of that firm longer than any other employee, black or white. Morris was 59 years old and belonged to William Oliver before the war, and has lived among many prominent Trenton families since, who all speak the highest praise for him. He was buried at three o'clock this evening. The Southern Grocer Company closed its doors during the hour of the funeral and the employees all attended in a body out of respect to him."

At the close of the Civil War, being a 'freed man of color,' Willis began to acquire property for himself. In 1877, he met and married Bessie Agricole, a Creole from south Louisiana. Ten children were born to this union, seven of whom lived to maturity, Kate, Alonzo, Gettie, Roy, Morris Jr., Browder and Eugene.



Kate married Samuel Luther Carroll, son of Trenton pioneers Henry Clay Carroll and Eliza Bass Carroll. Carroll High School was named for H. C. Carroll. Kate and Luther were the parents of four children, Ethel, Morris Henry, Arniece, and Gladys. Morris Henry Carroll became a person of high esteem and prominence in Ouachita Parish. He married Henri-Anna Johnson, daughter of Henrietta Windham Johnson and Arthur Herbert Johnson, M.D., the first black physician in northeast Louisiana. Dr. Johnson's portrait hangs in the Glenwood Medical Mall. A Monroe recreation center was named for Henrietta Windham Johnson.

Henri-Anna owned La Henri-Anna Beauty School and assisted Henry financially in receiving his Doctorate in Education. He built the first gymnasium and auditorium for Monroe Colored High School. As the first principal of Carroll High School, he was an outstanding figure in the community during the time of integration.

Alonzo married Jimmie May. Four children were born to this union, Alonzo Jr., Walter, Alton and Helen. They lived in a large home on Cypress Street next to the old Willis home where he helped manage the Willis Dairy that consisted of 150 acres, bordered on the north by Arkansas Road, on the south by Cypress Street, on the west by Warren Drive, and on the east by Splane Drive and Swiss Street.

Gettie never married. She resided in the home of her parents where she was born at the corner of Cypress Street and Warren Drive maintaining a family atmosphere as her mother had done until her death in 1939. As a prominent educator she acquired a large circle of friends. Educated at Tuskegee Institute and Southern University, she held a distinction of never missing one day of school as a teacher at Monroe Colored High School.

Roy married Naomi Boley, daughter of Susan Gosby and Marion Francis Boley. The Boley family owned and operated Boley's Dairy on Cypress Street. Boley Elementary School was built on part of the original Boley property acquired in 1866 by Marion Boley's mother, Jane Boley, a freed slave. Roy operated the Boley Dairy for many years after the death of his father-in-law. He and Naomi were the parents of one daughter, Dorothy Alice Willis Newman, who became a professor at Southern University.

Morris Jr. married Lou Willie Lee. Two children were born to this union, Irma Willis Myles, a long-time educator in the Ouachita Parish School System, and Morris Oliver. Morris worked at the Willis Dairy with his brothers Alonzo and Browder.

Browder married Florence Thompson. They were the parents of three children, Mary Elizabeth, Daisy, and Browder, Jr. Just prior to World War I, Browder and Florence established Willis' Sunshine Dairy on the Morris and Bessie Willis Estate with a small investment. Browder served in the war while brothers Alonzo and Morris, Jr. ran the business that developed into a 110 cow dairy serving Grade A milk twice daily to more than 300 families in Ouachita Parish. In addition to Florence and the Willis brothers, nine other people were employed.



Eugene became a prominent attorney. He later married Annie Lizzie Grayson, an educator in the Monroe City School System. They resided in the old Grayson home place, a Victorian house at the corner of DeSiard and 23rd Streets in Monroe. They had no children. Eugene with sister Gettie managed their parent's estate.

Being a successful entrepreneur and a man of vision, Browder Willis decided to subdivide part of the Willis family estate. On Oct. 31, 1949, he filed a plat for the establishment of a subdivision south of Arkansas Road known as Sunshine Heights. Streets were named for family members, Willis, Elizabeth, Florence, Ada, and of course, Jersey, for the dairy cows. Browder ordered pipe from St. Louis and developed most of the infrastructure himself. He also donated a large amount of acreage to the Ouachita Parish School Board

for the construction of Highland Elementary School, adjacent to the subdivision. What a man ahead of his time, a black business man, developing a totally white subdivision and donating a parcel of land for a totally white school that by law his family could not attend.

Property was also acquired from the Willis estate for the construction of the White Columns Apartment Complex.

The last remaining 16.63 acres of the Willis farm established by Morris and Bessie Willis in 1879 was sold 100 years later in October of 1979 to Safeway Store, Inc. for \$749,999.93. The Morris Willis homestead, the Alonzo Willis house, and the Sunshine Dairy barn as well as other out buildings were razed and the property leveled for the construction of Sunshine Height Shopping Center.

All of the grandchildren of Morris and Bessie Willis received good educations and became citizens of prominence.

Daisy Willis Shands of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, is the last remaining grandchild.

