

John Williams' Pistol

Edwin N. Gewirz

In early summer of 1864, General Joseph E. Johnston was holding off Sherman from taking Atlanta, stalling, feinting and avoiding a pitched battle at any cost. He probably believed that if he could hold off a Northern victory until after the election, Lincoln might be defeated at the polls. He counted on Northern weariness and the taking of heavy casualties to do the job.

President Jefferson Davis saw otherwise. He wanted victories in the field and believed hard fighting would end the war, so he relieved Johnston of command and put General John Bell Hood in his place. He was a stand-up fighter, but not suited for the job. He did what Sherman wanted and on September 2, Atlanta fell.

Sherman took what he wanted and burned a large portion of Atlanta. Then he began a leisurely march to Savannah and the sea, pillaging and burning as he went. He reached the capital, Milledgeville, in the middle of November with 62,000 troops and pillaged it. Only the state prison was burned.

The union troops confiscated all the arms they could, but at least one was missed. Mary Anne Cowles, the wife of George Evans and the granddaughter of "Honest John Williams," saved one of a pair of flintlock pistols that had been her grandfather's by hiding it in her pantaloons.

John Williams was born in Bertie County, North Carolina, on the 10th of April 1782. His father emigrated to Baldwin County, Georgia, when John was an infant.¹ He grew up there and served as a second lieutenant in Captain John Irwin's Troop of Light Dragoons, Major Frederick Freeman's squadron of cavalry, Georgia Militia, War of 1812. His service commenced August 22, 1813, and he was discharged February 28, 1814.² According to family records, John Williams also served in the Seminole Wars, 1817-1818.

During the years 1826 through 1828, he served in the State Senate from Baldwin County and became known as "Honest John Williams". He became State Treasurer on November 24, 1831, and served in this position until November 23, 1833.³

John Williams built a fine house on the corner of Liberty and Washington streets in Milledgeville during the years 1820-1822. The doorway is considered



the most perfect example in Milledgeville. The same doorway with its fan window and side window panels is repeated above it on the second floor, leading to a small balcony.⁴

Milledgeville, Baldwin County, was the State Capital of Georgia from 1807 to 1867. Following the Civil War, Atlanta replaced Milledgeville as the State Capital.

This pistol was obtained by Mr. Allen P. Karr of Baltimore, Maryland, from Major George Latimer Evans of Silver Spring, Maryland, a descendant of John Williams, in the fall of 1964. Mr. Karr, being quite ill, sold the pistol to his friend, Stanley Myllo, Linthicum, Maryland. Mr. Myllo tried to research the pistol at this time, but was so frustrated at the lack of information that he sold it to me in 1968. The only information he obtained was from the family.

The fine flintlock pistol saved from Union confiscation by John Williams' granddaughter is an example of what is commonly called a Kentucky pistol. It is 16 inches overall, has a 10 3/4 inch octagonal barrel of .49 caliber and has a lock with petaled markings used by British makers on trade locks.

The Jay Treaty between the United States and Great Britain at the end of 1794 placed British commerce on a most favored nation basis and the locksmithing trade in the Black County towns of England received an enormous boost. With these new low duties, locks could be imported at a lower price from England than they could be manufactured in the United States. From this time until the Civil War there



John Williams' Pistol



The left side of John Williams' Pistol



"John Williams, 1812" inscription on the sideplate



John Williams' House 1820-1822

was large scale exportation of locks to the United States; after the War it diminished steadily. The British were able to manufacture large quantities of locks, some years approximately half a million a year.⁵

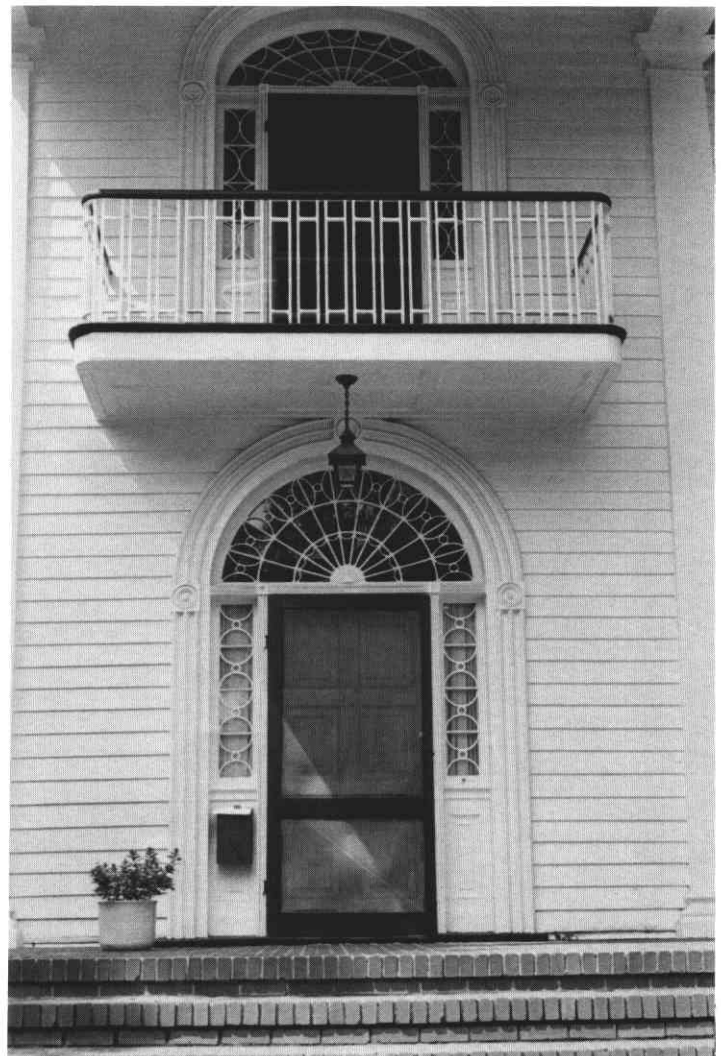
There are flats on the sides of the grips. The trigger guard and single ferrule are of brass. The two screw sideplate is silver and engraved in script, "John Williams 1812". There are no markings on the barrel or inside the lock. According to family legend passed down to Mr. George L. Evans, a descendent of John Williams, the pistol was one of a pair and they were used by Williams through the Seminole Wars. There is a crack on the flat of the butt on the lockplate side of the pistol. This crack is repaired with two small nails. The damage occurred during the Seminole Wars. The stock is of curly maple.

In 1836 John Williams moved to an estate near Macon and died in Macon on August 1, 1839. His obituary in the Macon Messenger reads:

August 8, 1839

Died in Macon on Thursday the 1st instant after an illness of 7 or 8 days, John Williams, Esq. He contracted his disease in the lower counties and finding himself very ill, he hastened to Macon, where he arrived exhausted of fatigue and disease, and survived only one week. He was born on the 10th of April, 1782, in Bertie County, North Carolina, from which state his father emigrated to Georgia when his son was an infant. He was for many years a citizen of Baldwin County, which county he twice represented in the Senate of the State, and subsequently was placed by the Legislature at the head of the Treasury Department. He has left a numerous family of children and grandchildren to mourn his loss.

Williams was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery, Macon, Georgia, in the Cowles family plot, Holly Ridge section, lot 24 block 3. His daughter, Mary Anne Williams, was married on October 24th, 1833, to Loyal



The beautiful doorway of John Williams' House

Cowles in Milledgeville, Georgia, and evidently the Cowles family was proud to have John Williams buried in their plot. There is a large monument and his wife is buried beside him. The monument reads:

Sacred to the memory of John Williams a native of North Carolina, who at an early age removed to this state. In the War of 1812, he served as Lieutenant in Floyds Army and in the Battle of Autassie won for himself the character of a brave and generous man. Twice he represented the County Baldwin in the Senate of the Legislature and served a constitutional term as Treasurer of the State, both of which posts he filled with uprightness and ability. Was born April 19, 1782, died August 1 1839 aged 57 years, 3 months and 12 days.

The other side of the monument reads:

Anne Ruth Tatum, wife of John Williams. Died October 8, 1861, age 81 years.

The Williams pistol, held in obscurity by the family for so many years, had an interesting story to tell, a story of an American patriot who tried his best to serve his country and his state in all the duties he was called upon to perform. He performed them well and brought honor to himself and his family.

NOTES

1. Obituary, *Macon County Messenger*. (Macon, Georgia: August 8, 1839).
2. Military Service, War of 1812, Record and Pension Office, War Department. (Washington, D.C.), 688, 745.
3. Family Records.
4. Nelle Womack Hines, *A Treasury Album of Milledgeville and Baldwin County Georgia*. (Press of J. W. Burke Company, 1936), 41.
5. DeWitt Bailey and Douglas A. Nie, *English Gunmakers*. (New York: Arco Publishing Co., Inc., 1978) 24.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

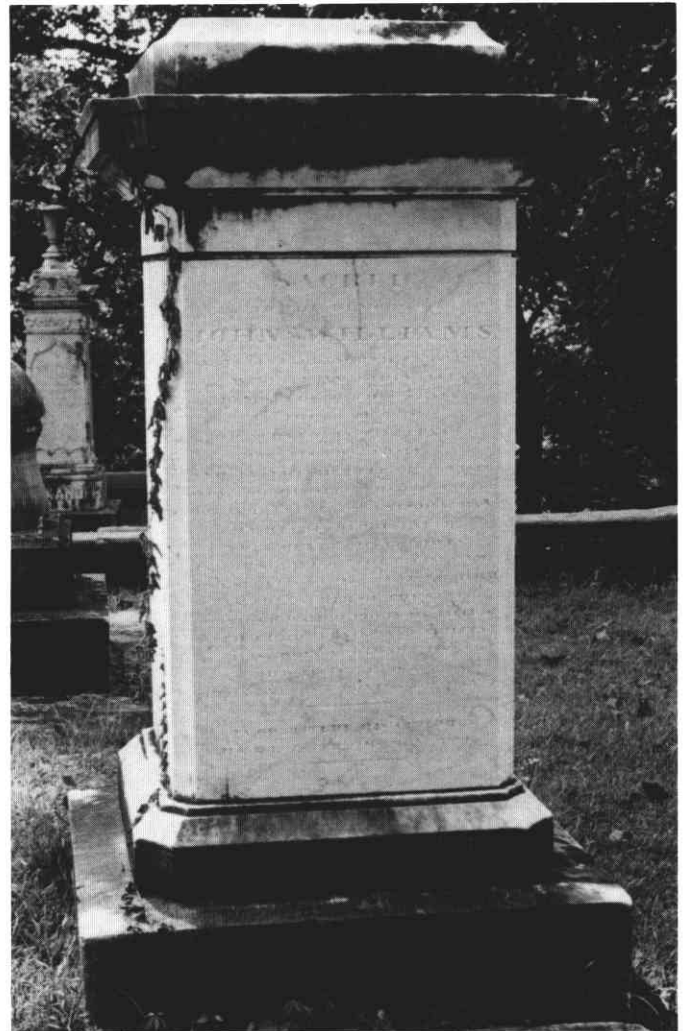
1. DeWitt Bailey and Douglas A. Nie., *English Gunmakers*. New York: Arco Publishing Company, Inc., 1978.
2. *Family Records*
3. *Macon County Messenger*. Macon, Georgia, August 8, 1839.
4. *Military Service-War of 1812*. Washington, D.C.: Records and Pension Office, War Department.
5. Nelle Womack Hines, *A Treasury Album of Milledgeville and Baldwin County, Georgia*. Press of J. W. Burke Company, 1936.



Historic Rose Hill Cemetery, Macon, Georgia



Monument to John Williams and his wife in Caules family lot, Rose Hill Cemetery, Macon, Georgia



Monument and Grave of John Williams