

COMMENTARY

Wealthy widow accepts proposal

Second marriage to dynamic minister in 1818 was brief

Marriage, the second time around, is not necessarily a perfected art. Martha Elliott of Fort Mill was 27 when she married Capt. Joseph White of the Waxhaws in 1802. A year later the couple were parents of a son they named William Elliott White. The following year Joseph White died. His estate was appraised at \$6,284. One of the provisions of the will was that his son receive a liberal education.

Martha apparently had good business sense for she was able to successfully manage her plantation. She planted cotton, owned a cotton gin and increased the number of slaves she had inherited.

Martha White would have been considered a very eligible widow. We have no way of knowing how many marriage proposals she may have received but do know that it was 14 years before she accepted the offer of the Rev. James Wallis, pastor of the Providence Presbyterian Church in lower Mecklenburg County, where he had served since 1792.

Wallis, 56, had a distinguished



Nearby history

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background. He was well educated, a graduate of the famous Mount Zion Institute of Winnsboro. He had an honorary degree from the University of North Carolina and served on its board of trustees. He wrote a theological book and founded a well-known academy at Providence. He also attempted to found a school for the Catawba Indians that failed.

In addition to ministering at Providence Church, Wallis often rode horseback to another congregation when it lacked a minister. He preached at the Waxhaws and at Fort Mill's Unity Church in 1810. That might be where he first met Mrs. White.

A Presbyterian historian, the

Rev. Foote, wrote of Wallis that he was "small of stature, quick in his motions, warm in his attachments, ardent in his delivery of sermons, and above all, fearless in his actions."

Wallis' wife, Jean Bain Alexander, known as Polly or Mary, died May 18, 1816. According to legend it was her second death. Supposedly several years before 1816 she had been buried alive. When grave robbers opened the coffin to steal her jewelry, she is supposed to have sat up, sending them fleeing in terror.

Martha White and Wallis signed a "Deed of Trust" (also known as a prenuptial agreement) dated May 9, 1818. It was drawn up by David Hutchison, guardian of her son William Elliott White, then 17. It stated that Wallis would receive \$500 from her estate if she died first.

Martha White Wallis died Oct. 23, 1819, at 44 and is buried in Old Unity Cemetery in Fort Mill (apparently she never moved to Providence). Her will left Wallis \$200, her brother Samuel Elliott

the use of her cotton gin, and her bed and clothing to her sister Dorcas Elliott. The remainder was left to her minor son to receive when he came of age.

Wallis, represented by his son William B.A. Wallis, challenged the will on Nov. 12, 1819, in the York County Court of the Ordinary (now probate judge). Wallis maintained that the deed of trust was "obtained by surprise and extortion," that the language of the deed was not lawful, that the will and the deed of trust were in conflict and that it was not recorded in the secretary of state's office.

When the court hearings were held, Wallis was not present but "sick abed" with his son representing him. White's brother and sister and two neighbors offered testimony for her. **To be continued.**

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