

Introduction & Land Acknowledgment

Why tell this story?

Before this land was “Walnut Hill” or “Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve,” it was a place where Indigenous communities passed through, and possibly hunted and farmed. As “Walnut Hill,” it was part of a plantation, where owners forced enslaved Black people to work. Later, it was part of a family farm in a community where Black and white people owned land and farmed.

Triangle Land Conservancy has worked with the UNC Community Histories Workshop to share the history of this land in these kiosks. But there is so much more we will share in the coming months and years. There were troves of files and information about a few white families: the Williamsons, the Mials, the Prices. There is not as much information easily accessible about the Indigenous communities who might have farmed or hunted in this area, the enslaved people who were forced to work here, or the Black landowners who were able to acquire and farm their own land, as well as those who worked as tenants or farmhands on the farms of white landowners.

For hundreds of years, white people attempted to erase the atrocities committed throughout the U.S. against Indigenous and Black people, to erase their cultures and traditions. TLC aims to do our small part to continue our research to lift up the stories of all the people who lived and worked on this land, which includes the Indigenous, Black, and white people who have been connected to or have farmed this land. This work is just the beginning of our plans to ensure that people who visit this nature preserve know the fuller story: the evils that have been inflicted as well as the joy and hope that has been experienced on this land.

What are our next steps?

The story is unfolding, but we envision a partnership with local universities to explore more of the documents and papers associated with the land and surrounding area. We also look forward to sharing written and oral histories of descendants of those who have lived or worked with this land. Stay tuned.

2020: Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve opens as TLC’s first public nature preserve that has multi-use trails alongside active farming.

2003: Bailey P. Williamson passes. He and his wife Sarah approached TLC in the early 2000s about conserving the land.

1940: NC State University operates a Soil Conservation Experiment Station on part of the farm.

1879: Alonzo T. Mial’s daughter, Ella Scheherazade Mial, marries Capt. Bailey P. Williamson.

1865: End of the Civil War and Emancipation. By 1860, the Mials had owned 33 enslaved people.

1811: Thomas Mial Jr. inherits the plantation.

1775: Thomas Mial Sr. establishes Walnut Hill on about 430 acres in Wake County, after acquiring land that was part of an original Granville land grant.

Indigenous people have long lived in what is now modern-day North Carolina, possibly dating back to at least 8,000 BCE. The land that became Wake County was within the larger area of the piedmont and coastal plain that Tuscarora peoples occupied by the colonial period. King Charles II claimed ownership of the land for England and created the Province of Carolina in 1663.

21st Century

2013: TLC purchases 405 acres from Bailey and Sarah Williamson’s daughters, Betty Brandt Williamson and Sally Greaser, who donated 60% of the value of the land.

20th Century

1977: Bailey P. Williamson, son of Carl Williamson, inherits part of the land. He grows crops and raises cattle on the farm.

1933: Carl L. Williamson Sr., son of Ella Mial and Capt. Bailey P. Williamson, inherits a portion of Walnut Hill.

19th Century

1866: Good Hope Baptist Church, about a mile from the preserve, was founded by formerly enslaved Black people living in the area.

1830: Thomas Mial Jr.’s wife, Scheherazade Price Mial, and son, Alonzo T. Mial, inherit the land.

18th Century

1795: Thomas Mial Sr. purchases an enslaved man named Coff.

Pre-Colonial Era

Origins of Walnut Hill

By the start of the colonial era, the Tuscarora people were dominant in the region that became eastern North Carolina, with towns along the upper and lower Neuse, Tar, and Roanoke rivers. Indigenous people in fact had lived in parts of North Carolina for millennia, beginning at least 10,000 years ago and possibly earlier. The Tuscarora were among many Indigenous peoples in the Southeast who developed agriculture, growing food like maize and beans, while also hunting, fishing, and trading with Indigenous people and European settlers. Southeastern Native Americans traded diverse goods in networks that reached at least as far as the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes.

In the 1660s, King Charles II claimed ownership over their homelands and granted them to white colonists. This land eventually became part of Walnut Hill plantation in the 18th century. During the early 1700s, colonial militias killed, enslaved, or drove out many of the Native Americans from the Carolinas. This forcible and destructive dispossession made the recovery of Indigenous history in this region difficult. However, TLC will continue to work to honor and tell the story of Native Americans connected to this land. Today there are eight American Indian tribes recognized by the state of North Carolina, and more than 180,000 people in the state identify as Native Americans, or as Native Americans along with other ethnicities.

In 1775, longleaf pines and hardwoods covered much of this part of Wake County, when Thomas Mial Sr. purchased 430 acres, built a home in a grove of walnut trees, and established Walnut Hill. Relying in part on the work of enslaved people, Mial cleared a portion of the land for planting food crops and likely tobacco, and later for cotton. But much of the property remained forested, and the Mials used the forest for firewood and lumber for farm buildings.

Following the American Revolution, the Mials expanded Walnut Hill, and by the early 1800s, they mostly raised cotton. As Eli Whitney's cotton-gin technology gave new life to cotton agriculture in the South, the Mials relied increasingly on the forced labor of enslaved people.

Thomas Mial Jr. inherited the property, and he married Scheherazade Price, who grew up nearby at Oaky Grove plantation. Scheherazade brought additional wealth to the marriage, as her family owned one of the most valuable plantations in Wake and Johnston counties. When Thomas Mial Jr. died in 1830, the family owned at least 13 enslaved people and about 1,300 acres, which Mial passed on to

Scheherazade and their son, Alonzo T. Mial Sr.

Agriculture in antebellum North Carolina was often a difficult and uncertain way of life. Smaller farmers and slave-owning planters like the Mial family worked hard from harvest to harvest. But larger landowners like the Mials also built their wealth on the free labor of enslaved people, who did most of the difficult work to produce cash crops like cotton and tobacco. The daily work by enslaved people who cared for farm animals, tended food crops, and myriad other tasks enabled plantations to function and thrive for the benefit of the white landowners.



A portrait of Alonzo Thomas Mial.
Record N.99.1.162, General Negative Collection,
State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC



A 2018 photo of the preserve, which was once likely passed through by the Tuscarora people, later became a plantation, then a family farm, and is now a nature preserve and farm.

Slavery to Emancipation

By the eve of the American Civil War, Walnut Hill was a thriving agricultural enterprise and home for the growing Mial family. It was also the site of restricted futures and forced labor for 33 enslaved Black women, men, and children owned by the Mials in 1860: about four times as many enslaved people lived and worked at Walnut Hill as in the Mial household, which included Alonzo and Victoria Mial and six children in 1860.

The Mials had expanded Walnut Hill into one of the largest plantations in Wake County by 1860, totaling about 2,240 acres. They were prominent citizens and helped to make Wake County one of the state’s top producers of cotton in the antebellum era.

Tilling fields and sowing cotton seeds began in March or early April, followed by weeding and thinning the plants over the summer. The fluffy cotton bolls began to appear in August, and the harvest usually began in September. The history of the enslaved

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Shift to Tobacco in the 20th Century

As the years passed into the early twentieth century, North Carolina developed a much stronger industrial sector. Companies making textiles, cigarettes, and other products expanded dramatically, and railroad networks and the populations of towns and cities grew. By the 1920s, North Carolina had the most industrial activity among all states in the American South. Still, farming remained a defining part of the state's economic, political, and social life.

At Walnut Hill, Victoria Mial passed away in 1901, four years after her husband Alonzo's death. One of their sons, Millard, inherited a large portion of the land and continued raising cotton, relying on the labor of tenants and farmhands, some of whom were descended from the people formerly held as slaves at Walnut Hill. Millard Mial gradually shifted his focus to tobacco like many other landowners in North Carolina. The infamous boll weevil had reached North Carolina by the late 1920s and began damaging cotton crops. Meanwhile, tobacco agriculture and the cigarette industry boomed in the state.

When Millard died in 1933, he passed on a portion of the lands to his sister, Ella Mial Williamson. One of her sons, Carl, ran the farming operations on the family's portion of the old Walnut Hill lands. Carl Williamson later inherited some of the land

in the 1940s and acquired acreage from his siblings as well. Carl, his wife, Betty, and tenants on the farm raised tobacco, a process that typically began in January, with planting tobacco seeds in seed beds. While the seeds grew for about six weeks in the beds, farmers plowed and fertilized fields in preparation, relying on the mules that are so familiar from images of southern farm life well into the 1950s.

Farmers "set out" seedlings in the fields in April and spent the next three to four months weeding, snapping off buds so that nutrients

went to the leaves, and removing pests.

They started the harvest in late July and picked leaves several times during the season. Farmers tied the leaves onto sticks and hung them in tobacco barns to dry. Next, they moved the leaves to packhouses for grading and bundling in October and early November, and finally transported the bundles to tobacco warehouses for sale.

In rural North Carolina communities like Shotwell, a sense of shared labor and community became a meaningful part of the tobacco harvest in the decades after World War II. Tenant families helped one another when they could, and landowning families worked together with tenants and hired farmhands to bring in the harvest. In the Williamson family, Betty Brandt Williamson remembers that, growing up here in the 1950s and 60s, she helped in getting tobacco leaves ready for drying, as did her sister Sally, and their mother Sarah. They did not get a pass on this work as members of the landowning family. "It was dirty and sweaty work," Betty Brandt remembers. "It was hard work. But it was honorable work."



Figure 1. Runoff plots and catchment equipment from which soil and water loss measurements were made.

From Thomas L. Copley et al., "Soil management of bright tobacco in lower Piedmont," Raleigh: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1954, pp. 3-36

In the years after the switch to tobacco, NC State University had a research station on Williamson Farm. A 1954 article includes a photo of the station with Oaky Grove Methodist Church in the background.



The Walnut Hill plantation house in the 1960s/70s. Photo in Williamson family records.

Farm to Preserve in the 21st Century

Generations of residents in the community of Shotwell have thrived, struggled, found opportunities, and faced profound hardships and injustices. They have worshipped, established roots, and raised families here, or left this rural community to build lives elsewhere.

Gregory Mial was born in Shotwell in 1950 and lived here for his first few years. His family ties include a direct connection to the enslaved community at Walnut Hill, as one of his ancestors, Sidney Mial, was an enslaved man owned by Alonzo Mial. After Gregory Mial finished the third grade, his family moved to Raleigh. He went on to graduate from college in Greensboro and see some of the world while serving in the U.S. Army as a finance officer. But memories of his childhood years in Shotwell in the 1950s remain vivid for him.

Good Hope Baptist Church plays a central role in these memories. “Sunday morning, we would get up early and drive our Chevrolet down for Sunday school, then there were services starting about 10:30 or 11 o’clock,” Mial remembers. “We would go eat after that and go back for something else in the afternoon. Sunday was centered around the church, and it was a full day of it... You felt that you were a part of an organization, and part of a loving family.”

Nearby on the Williamson farm, Carl and Betty Williamson installed the first irrigation system in Wake County in the 1950s. They continued farming tobacco as their cash crop, while the family also raised wheat, corn, soybeans, and cattle over the years. Carl and Betty eventually divided their land and passed sections on to their five sons including Bailey Williamson. He and his wife, Sarah, came to own the 405 acres that now form this preserve and carried on the family tradition in farming tobacco until 1967, before shifting to raising row crops and cattle.

With Triangle Land Conservancy’s purchase of the land in 2013, Sarah and Bailey’s daughters, Sally and Betty Brandt, helped to realize the hope of their parents to permanently preserve the fields and woods. Working on this land had always meant a great deal to Bailey, right up to his passing. “He loved being down there,” Sally says about her father. “He loved the open space. He even made the statement on more than one occasion that he felt closer to God down at the farm, than he did in a church. [And] he felt like this little section of the eastern part of the county just needed to stay forever as open space.”



Photo: Land, Ltd.

Visiting the land still evokes powerful memories and feelings for the sisters. “You just sort of feel close to your ancestors,” Betty Brandt shares. “You can go down there, and you can almost feel your blood pressure drop. You go down there and hear the wind going through the trees.”

As you explore the preserve today, we hope that you keep this history in mind. Every acre of land has a complicated story, and we’re still working on sharing it all, the good and the bad parts of this preserve’s story. We hope that you will hear the wind in the trees, find renewal, and create your own lasting memories as you explore the preserve today.

Thank you to our supporters and partners!

UNC Community Histories Workshop

Established in 2016, the UNC Community Histories Workshop (CHW) works with local communities to recover, preserve, and share the memories, stories, and materials that reflect the multi-layered histories of place. Dr. Rob Shapard identified, researched, and inventoried all archival holdings in the State Archives of North Carolina, NC State University, and county-level libraries related to Williamson Preserve. He also identified archives held by families, individuals, and community stakeholders, in addition to conducting interviews with many people and their descendants related to Williamson Preserve, including the Williamsons' daughters, Betty Brandt Williamson and Sally Greaser, as well as Gregory Mial, who was born and raised in the Shotwell community. Dr. Shapard drafted these signs with TLC, and CHW has provided guidance to TLC on next steps with archiving these materials, as well as how to continue research on the property and surrounding community.

Documentation of the history of Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve and the partnership with the UNC Community Histories Workshop would not have been possible without the support of The Jandy Ammons Foundation and the Triangle Community Foundation.



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**With your support, we can conserve more acres,
connect more people to nature, protect more local
farms, and safeguard clean water in the Triangle.**

