

Wesley Wills and The Lebanon African American Cemetery
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We sometimes forget that regardless how dire the circumstances in which people live they have dreams - goals they want to reach and things they plan to do if given the chance. Some of you may be familiar with the saying from the Great Depression era of tenant farming, "If I live to see next year ..." This saying captures the idea that despite possible perils there is still hope that one can work to make the future better.

It appears the life of Wesley Wills was undergirded by a vision, a dream, a possibility that his efforts could turn into a reality. Wills was born in 1839, the son of Ceasar and Matilda Wills who came to Haywood County from NC. Wesley who was enslaved for the first 26 years of his life had dreams, goals, and ambitions, some of which he was able to achieve during his 81 years lifetime.

Wills married Amanda Lynk in 1862 and they successfully reared 10 children to adulthood. Their children were: Wesley, Jr., Branch, Tommy, John Pete, Mary, Emma, Mattie, Frances, Gossie, and Callie. The Wills also raised their grandson, Matt Wills (son of daughter, Mattie Wills and Jerry Singleton). They educated their numerous offsprings during the last half of the 1800s and first decade of 1900s.

Wesley and Amanda Wills bought a farm from William Link that they sold in 1913 with the stipulation that 1/4 acre be set aside for a family burial ground. We can wonder about the motivation for this act. Perhaps it was grounded in the desire for the family to have a secure final resting place after a lifetime of insecurity. Perhaps it was a personal response to the tightening yoke of segregation in 1913. Or maybe it was a combination of things. While we may never know the motivation underlying the creation of this cemetery, the burial ground Wesley created is a reality. It is located in the Lebanon Community, near the Lebanon Methodist Church and is commonly known as the Lebanon African American Cemetery.

Thanks to Kay Frances Stewart, great granddaughter of Wesley and Amanda Wills, for information and Ms. Hancy Wills' entry in the 1989 History of Haywood County, TN,