



Historians' Publications



Red, White and Bluebloods in Frontier Florida by Malcolm B. Johnson

Chapter Five

William Wirt's Dream

One of the great lawyers of early American history started a plantation between Tallahassee and Monticello with contracted free white labor during the hey day of slavery, but the project collapsed when the free workers ran out on their contract.

William Wirt, Attorney General of the United States in the Monroe and John Quincy Adams administrations, wanted to spend his declining years in Middle Florida. It was a dream that has been shared by many over the years.

Wirt was born in Maryland in 1772 of Swiss and German parents.¹ He was one of the prosecutors of Aaron Burr for treason in 1807, attorney for the Cherokee Nation in its effort to resist being removed from its native Georgia territory in 1830, and a candidate for the presidency in 1832.² He opposed Daniel Webster in the famous Dartmouth College case and won from Webster an observation that Wirt "is a good deal of a lawyer, and has very quick perceptions, and handsome power of argument."³ He was an intimate friend of such men as Thomas Jefferson, and evidently shared Jefferson's objections to slavery, on principle. He was author of an early biography of Patrick Henry, a work with which Jefferson helped him.⁴

As early as 1825, only four years after the Territory of Florida was acquired by the United States from Spain, Wirt began making his plans for a life of leisure and luxury in the Tallahassee area.

Earliest entry found on the land records of Jefferson county is in the name of Elizabeth Gamble Wirt, his wife. About three miles southwest of Monticello, the land described in the April 23, 1825, entry was the eventual site of Wirtland plantation,





but its establishment didn't follow William Wirt's new and visionary plan.

Wirt's enthusiasm for Florida living—though he may never have come to the state—was so great that he bought enough land in the area to give each of his children a plantation.

Laura Henrietta, born in 1803, the oldest of 12 Wirt children, was the first to be given Florida acreage by her father.

During the summer of 1827, Laura Wirt married Thomas Randall of Annapolis, Md., who was then an attorney in Washington. His father-in-law, in his second term as Attorney General, perhaps had a hand in Randall's prompt appointment as a District Judge in the New Territory.⁵

The young couple, accompanied by Mrs. Wirt's two brothers, John and Robert Gamble (briefly secretary to John Marshall) and their families, who also had visions of fortune and good living in North Florida, arrived in Leon County during the fall of 1827.⁶

The Randalls immediately began establishment of Belmont plantation, in the same area as the first Wirt land purchase. The Gambles too, started plantations with high hopes for the future.

Advice to his daughter in 1827 is contained in a letter from William Wirt to Laura Wirt Randall:

Will you let me give you a hint? You are going to a newly settled country—do you wish to make your husband and yourself popular? Dress as plainly as possible, and conform as closely as you can to the manners of the place. Any other course, especially fine dressing and haut-ton manners will excite only envy, criticism, malignity, quarrels and contempt.⁷

A note of cheer to a homesick daughter, resident of the Territory of Florida for several months, U.S. Atty. Gen. William Wirt, December, 1827:

I think you will do well,—and I am so much delighted with every report that reaches me of the country, that I count sanguinely myself on settling a plantation and coming out to live. I have none of your horrors of a country life in a new country. Florida bids fair to be a perfect Arcadia. Such a climate! Such a soil! Such productions and such society as you will have in a few years! Can anything be more delightful!

How dull and monotonous Washington is, as compared with the new objects that are continually meeting your eye!—the fine forests, the fine lands, the balmy, genial air, the tropical-tinted birds, the alligators, the barking frogs, and all the other elegancies of nature's drawing room. You must not despond, my dear child.⁸





In a letter to William Pope in March 1828, Wirt said, "I suppose you saw Governor D---, on his way through Virginia. He is a lighthearted, joyous fellow, and has gone home buoyant with the hope of fortune by the culture of sugar and sea-island cotton. They are all sanguine on this subject in Florida,—and I think they have reason. But we have yet to see what lesson experience will teach. My two brothers and my son-in-law have turned into cropping might and main—and I dare say they all count upon being rich in ten years"

Experience taught the Randalls and the Gambles the slave-worked plantations in Florida could indeed succeed, as they were succeeding all over the rest of the South.

But William Wirt and another son-in-law had a different plan.

It was carefully thought-out. It was designed for the comfort and contentment of German immigrants under contract as laborers, and as an eventual "princely establishment" and "comfortable asylum" for members of the Wirt family and German colonists alike.

Louis Goldsborough, Lieutenant in the Navy, was the new husband of Elizabeth Wirt, second daughter of the house, and a man of imagination. His scheme for the establishment of Wirtland was new and visionary in 1833, but practical men thought it would succeed.

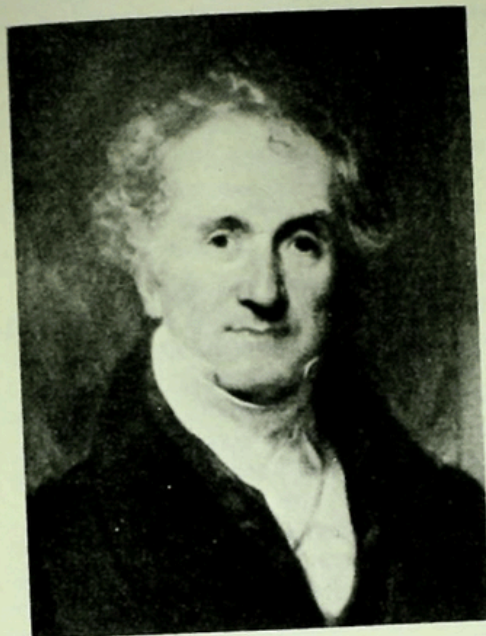
In a letter to Mrs. Wirt, written from Washington on January 31, 1833, Wirt explained the plan to her:

—Here I am waiting—, meantime helping Louis with his whaling project, as he calls this German scheme. The whaling voyages, he says, suggested it to him. The only pay the sailor gets in these voyages is what they call 'lay'; that is, a share of the profits. And yet they are the happiest and most faithful of seamen. I have been so often baffled in my attempts to settle our Florida tract, that I expect the same disappointment in this attempt. Yet Louis and his other friends are so sanguine that I begin to suppose the thing may be possible.

I offer to take them out at my own expense, support them till the plantation will maintain them—to buy cattle, hogs, sheep, etc.,—to find horses, mules, and all the utensils necessary to the plantation, and to give them one-third of the clear profits.

They are to go with Louis to be placed under his government and direction. Their preacher, a Calvinist, will accompany them, and be the schoolmaster for their children. They will form a fine little village in the settlement, with their gardens in the rear of their dwellings, a broad street between, and a church, schoolhouse and





William Wirt
(1772-1834)
Twice U.S. Attorney
General, owned plantation,
Wirtland, between
Tallahassee and
Monticello



Louis Goldsborough
(1805-1877)
Wirt's son-in-law. His
free labor plantation
scheme failed, but he
rose to Admiral in the
U.S. Navy.

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give me a specimen of the rustic waltz of Germany and encourage music, dancing and all innocent amusements. Let the boys play leap-frog, prison base and ball in the street, or court, between the houses of the village, for the entertainment of their parents. Set some of them, in their leisure, to making Alp-horns for your shepherds. All these things will serve to knit their hearts to the place by multiplying their local associations and strengthening their gregarious propensities to their own particular society. There is nothing so exhilarating as the song of healthful, cheerful industry; and I hope to hear your people are too happy to be disposed to separate, either from each other or from you.¹⁴

Goldsborough and his colonists arrived in Florida sometime before the end of April. Just how carefully laid plans proceeded at Wirtland for the first several months of the project is lost in the haze of the past, but it didn't turn out that the people were "too happy to be disposed to separate" from either Louis Goldsborough or their contracts.

In less than three months, they had separated themselves permanently from Wirtland, and William Wirt had been separated from the \$6,000 to \$8,000 that he estimated as the initial cost of the venture. Available records don't reveal where the Germans went, but apparently they left the Tallahassee area.

In a letter dated July 18, 1833 to Goldsborough, Wirt said:

With regard to the Germans, considering what kind of cattle they have proved to be, I am so far from lamenting their desertion, that I think it quite a happy riddance. Never mind the affair. It is only one of 'our castles' tumbled down. I am so used to such things that I am rather more disposed to laugh than to weep at them. Thank Heaven, there are no bones broke in the way of pecuniary loss! We had, at least the foresight to anticipate such a result, and to take care to make the experiment as cheaply as possible. I am sorry for your disappointment. But regrets are vain. The thing has been done. We must not be unnerved by the disappointment but provide as vigorously as we can to meet the future.¹⁵

To his other son-in-law, Thomas Randall, Wirt wrote:

—I wonder how Louis has been able to bear up under it. I am infinitely more sorry on his account than my own. I know how much he had it at heart, and how sanguinely he counted on success, which I never did. Without any pretensions to so high a character, I think I can assure you that this affair will not leave a scar on my brain or my heart. Indeed, the explosion has been so quick and so complete, and there is something so droll in those rascals having gone so far to play so ridiculous a caper, that it seems to me rather





WILLIAM WIRT'S DREAM

47

more laughable than cryable; and much the strongest tendency I feel is to laugh, until I remember Louis's disappointment and mortification.¹⁶

Failure of this cooperative approach to plantation development dimmed neither Wirt's enthusiasm nor his hopes for retirement in the Florida Territory. By December of 1833 he had another plan afoot, and expected to be living in Florida "after two winters more, if we all live so long."¹⁷

Unfortunately, William Wirt didn't live so long. He died on Feb. 18, 1834, shortly after receiving news of the death of his eldest daughter, Laura Wirt Randall, at Belmont plantation.¹⁸ Judge Randall and his four young daughters later moved to Tallahassee and occupied the house still standing on the southwest corner of Calhoun and Carolina Streets.

Wirtland eventually was established for Mrs. Wirt and the remaining children by Louis Goldsborough, but with slave labor, in the manner of the times rather than with his earlier "new and visionary" plan. Goldsborough went back to his career in the Navy. He was head of the Naval Academy from 1853 to 1857, was made a Rear Admiral in 1862, and finally retired shortly after 1873.¹⁹

Wirtland was described in "Florida Breezes," Ellen Call Long's book of reminiscence of early days in this section of Florida:

The dwelling at Wirtland was a plain but commodious country house, upon approaching which no noisy hounds assailed you, but a Negro major domo, and one or two neatly dressed Negroes, met the party at the gate, which, opened, we were ushered into a garden of trailing vines, luxuriant shrubbery, brought to view by a holocaust of pine knots, on which had been cast sweet spices, and the porch was crowded with floating muslins and ribbons. . . .

Within there were white curtains looped with blue, and there were settees, ottomans, and chairs, all in blue and white. A conspicuous feature was a portrait of the distinguished orator (Wirt) represented in a Roman toga; but this retreat that he had provided for his declining years was scarcely planned before he was taken from his family and the nation; he never saw it, but his wife and daughters make it their home for the present. Mrs. Wirt is soft mannered and self poised, and wears a turban which adds the picturesque to her appearance, and eider-down cushions in her sleeves, that we still marvel over in the line of fashion. . . .

The hennery was a neatly white washed latticed shed, down the centre of which were two or three tiers of shelves, divided





perpendicularly with boards, thus forming rows of nests one above the other; and these were curtained with colored calicoes of pink, blue and red, all neatly hemmed and finished. It was odd, but it was nice, thus to follow out the natural instincts of fowls to hide their occupation. . . .²⁰

NOTES

1. John P. Kennedy, *Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt: Attorney General of the United States*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850), 1: 16 (hereafter cited as Kennedy, *Memoirs*).
2. *Ibid.*, 1:152, 2:240, 2:303.
3. Fletcher Webster, ed., *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1857), 1:275.
4. The publication of Wirt's book (*Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry*) coincided with his appointment as Attorney-General (1817). While generally favorably received, the biography was severely criticized by *The North American Review*, which was probably the most important American periodical of the era. Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams praised the book, but had reservations. Jefferson pronounced portions of it "a little too poetical." Adams felt that Wirt's portrayal of Henry slighted the role of James Otis in the Revolution and subsequently (1819) published a series of political essays on the years 1774 and 1775. Kennedy *Memoirs*, 2: 24, 42, 43.
5. *Ibid.*, 2:201.
6. *Ibid.*, 2: 202.
7. *Ibid.*, 2: 203.
8. *Ibid.*, 2: 206.
9. *Ibid.*, 2: 211.
10. *Ibid.*, 2: 337.
11. *Ibid.*, 2: 339.
12. *Ibid.*, 2: 338.
13. *Ibid.*, 2: 341.
14. *Ibid.*, 2: 341-342.
15. *Ibid.*, 2: 343-344.
16. *Ibid.*, 2: 344.
17. *Ibid.*, 2: 363.
18. *Ibid.*, 2: 367.
19. Allen Johnson and Duman Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, (N.Y.: Charles Scribners Sons, 1931), p. 366.
20. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes: or Florida, New and Old* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1962), pp. 130, 133.