

William Ellison, Jr.

In 1800 the South Carolina legislature had set out in detail the procedures for manumission. To end the practice of freeing unruly slaves of "bad or depraved" character and those who "from age or infirmity" were incapacitated, the state required that an owner testify under oath to the good character of the slave he sought to free. Also required was evidence of the slave's "ability to gain a livelihood in an honest way." On June 8, 1816, William Ellison of Fairfield County appeared before a magistrate (with five local freeholders as supporting witnesses) to gain permission to free his slave, April, who was at the time 26 years of age. April was William Ellison, Jr. of Sumter County.

At birth, William Ellison, Jr. was given the name of "April." It was a popular practice among slaves of the period to name a child after the day or month of his or her birth. It is known that between the years 1800 and 1802 April was owned by a white slave-owner named William Ellison, son of Robert Ellison of Fairfield County in South Carolina. It is not documented as to who his owner was before that time. It can only be assumed that William Ellison, a planter of Fairfield district was either the father or the brother of William Ellison, Jr., freedman of Sumter County. April had his name changed to William Ellison by the courts, obviously in honor of William Ellison of Fairfield.

At the age of 10, William "April" Ellison was apprenticed and he was trained as a cotton gin builder and repairer. He spent six years training as a blacksmith and carpenter and he also learned how to read, write, cipher and to do basic bookkeeping. Since there are no records showing the purchase of April (later William Ellison of Sumter) by William Ellison of Fairfield, it is unknown as to how long April was owned by William Ellison. It is known that William Ellison of Fairfield inherited a large estate from his father Robert, and that the slaves of the estate, named in the will were left to his siblings. It is possible that Robert Ellison gave several slaves to his son before his death, so they would not have needed to have been mentioned in his will. William owned several slaves according to the census records. Both Robert and William were of an age to have been able to be the father of April.

April was trained as a machinist and he became a well known cotton gin maker. Upon receiving his freedom he decided to pursue his expertise in Sumter County,

South Carolina where found an eager market for his trade. He is well known for perfecting the cotton gin invented by Eli Whitney.

In 1816, April, now known as William Ellison, Jr. arrived in Stateburg where he initially hired slave workers from their local owners. By 1820 he had purchased two adult males to work in his shop. On June 20, 1820, April appeared in the Sumter District courthouse in Sumterville. Described in court papers submitted by his attorney as a “freed yellow man of about 29 years of age,” he requested a name change because it “would yet greatly advance his interest as a tradesman.” A new name would also “save him and his children from degradation and contempt which the minds of some do and will attach to the name April.” Because “of the kindness” of his former master and as a “Mark of gratitude and respect for him” April asked that his name be changed to William Ellison. His request was granted.

The Ellison family joined the Episcopalian Church of the Holy Cross in Stateburg and on August 6, 1824, William Ellis was the first black to install a family bench on the first floor of the church, among those of the other wealthy families of Stateburg. The poor whites and the other black church members, free and slave, sat in the balcony of the church.

Gradually, Ellison built up a small empire, purchasing slaves in increasing numbers as the years passed. He became one of South Carolina's major cotton gin manufacturers and sold his machines as far away as Mississippi. He regularly advertised his cotton gins in newspapers across the state. His ads may be found in historic copies of the Black River Watchman, the Sumter Southern Whig, and the Camden Gazzette.

By 1830, he owned four slaves who assisted him in his business. He then began to acquire land and even more slaves. In 1838 Ellison purchased 54.5 acres adjoining his original acreage from former South Carolina Governor Stephen Decater Miller. Ellison and his family moved into a large home on the property. (The house had been known as Miller House but became known as Ellison House.) As his business grew, so did his wealth and by 1840, Ellison owned 12 slaves. His sons, who lived in homes on the property, owned an additional nine slaves. By the early 1840s, he was one of the most prosperous men in the area. By the year 1850, he was the owner of 386 acres of land and 37 slaves. The workers on Ellison's plantation produced 35 bales of cotton that year.

In 1852, Ellison purchased Keith Hill and Hickory Hill Plantations which increased his land holdings to over 1,000 acres. By 1860 William Ellison was South Carolina's largest Negro slaveowner and in the entire state, only five percent of the people owned as much real estate as did William Ellison. His wealth was 15 times greater than that of the state's average for whites. Ellison also owned more slaves than did 99% of the South's slaveholders.

When War Between the States broke out in 1861, William Ellison, Jr. was one of the staunchest supporters of the Confederacy. His grandson joined a Confederate Artillery Unit, and William turned his plantation over from cotton cash crop production to farming foodstuff for the Confederacy.

William Ellison, Jr. died on 5 December 1861, at the age of 71 and per his wishes, his family continued to actively support the Confederacy throughout the war. Aside from producing corn, fodder, bacon, corn shucks, and cotton for the Confederate Army, they contributed vast amounts of money, paid \$5000 in taxes, and invested a good portion of their fortune into Confederate Bonds which were worthless at the end of the war.

William Ellison, Jr. had died with an estate appraised at \$43,500, consisting of 70 slaves. His will stated that his estate should pass into the joint hands of his daughter and his two surviving sons. He bequeathed \$500 to a slave daughter he had sold. At his death he was one in the top 10% of the wealthiest people in all of South Carolina, was in the top 5% of land ownership, and he was the third largest slave owner in the entire state.

Information compiled by Fairfield County Historical Museum Director Pelham Lyles