

Here lies

Investigators find 137-year-old grave of long-ago collector

By Laura Marlow
For the Leader

Former Jefferson County Collector John Williams no longer rests in an unmarked grave, thanks to the efforts of the De Soto family that now owns the farm where he was buried.

They joined forces with Williams' descendants and the Jefferson County Historical Society to find the grave and return the original headstone to its proper spot on the rolling hills alongside Hwy. E in De Soto.

Williams, who served as county collector in the period just after the Civil War, died of smallpox in April of 1872 and was buried on his family's property just south of town.

Over the years, his grave marker was apparently moved several times, and ended up being discarded in a wooded part of the property. The stone's original location, and therefore the site of Williams' grave, was lost to memory.

When Jim and Kami McCullough bought the 10-acre property as an invest-



Ted Howell photo

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Carole Goggin, left, and Laura Dickinson at the restored gravestone.

Headstone: Local historians return headstone to its proper location

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ment about a year ago, they found the stone and launched a search for the grave.

"I knew the information had to be out there someplace, so I went looking for it," Kami McCullough said. "I was working for Hillsboro Title Co., and I did a search, but I couldn't find anything about the grave."

"I was thinking maybe I'd find something in the deeds, when the property was sold or bought, but there was just nothing anywhere. It took me six months to find out the little bit I do know."

McCullough asked a neighbor, Mae Landrum, whose family had once lived in the house, to point out where the gravesite had been.

"Mrs. Landrum said her grandparents had lived in this house," McCullough said. "When we took her out here, she pointed to a spot where there was a white fence all crumbled down, saying that's where she remembered the grave being when she was a child."

Members of the Jefferson County Historical Society had information about the grave, but also were unsure about its location.

"We have photos of the headstone at the base of a big apple tree in the backyard of the house," said Carole Goggin, who serves on the Historical Society's cemetery board. "Then, photos taken later show the tree without the stone."

Smallpox dictated Williams' burial on family farm

Had he died under different circumstances, Williams would have been buried among his relatives and neighbors in the Swashin Baptist Church Cemetery (New) a short distance away from his family's farm. But the highly contagious nature of smallpox forced a different course of action.

"There are other single burials like this in the county, because of disease," Goggin said. "They wouldn't have wanted to handle the body any more than necessary, so he would have been buried very quickly, and right there on the property."

A local newspaper published an account of Williams' death in its April 5, 1872, issue:



Ted Howell photo

Laura Dickinson, left, tells the group about her great uncle, John Williams, and how happy she is that the stone has been restored. Listening are, from left, Eugene Klaus, Dave Hallemann, Carole Goggin and Dorothy Klaus.

"He caught the smallpox from a man who, after burying three of his family who died with the disease, came to Mr. Williams' office, stood there an hour or two and then paid him some money. If there is not, there should be, a heavy penalty against any who will carelessly assist in the spread of this disease."

Stone was rededicated in September ceremony

Goggin said the Historical Society's best information showed the grave might be located to the north of the house, in a field near what is now Hwy. E. She and society vice president Dave Hallemann

went to the spot Landrum pointed out in March of this year to see if they could locate the grave using dowsing rods.

"Dave picked it up right away," Goggin said. "Every time he walked over this one spot, his rods would cross. We marked it with little flags, one at the head and one at the foot. It may not be exactly on the site, but I would just bet it's within five feet."

The McCulloughs repaired the stone and moved it to the spot, concreting it into a base and putting up barrier rods to prevent anyone bumping into it with farm machinery.

In late September a small rededication ceremony was held at the restored headstone. Goggin and Hallemann represented the Historical Society, Dorothy Klaus attended for the De Soto chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and Laura Dickinson of De Soto, Williams' great-niece, represented the late county collector's family.

Goggin said the memorial will add to the character of the property.

"An historical site, nicely maintained, on a piece of property can only enhance its value," she said. "We're thrilled that the stone is back where it belongs. We are so fortunate to have homeowners who were so cooperative."

The McCulloughs have finished their rehab and have put the property up for sale. McCullough said she hopes the Williams gravesite, which sits at the north-

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Ted Howell photo

Carole Goggin, center, Laura Dickinson and Dave Hallemann at the restored gravestone for former Jefferson County Collector John Williams.

Headstone: Family pleased with move

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east corner of the property, will appeal to a prospective owner with a fondness for history.

"I think it's great having it here," McCullough said. "I'd like for it to somehow get into the official records, too. Look what happened before – in 100 years, the stone might not be here, and it would be good to know exactly

where it was."

But she said there's a simpler, more basic reason her family went to the trouble to get Williams' grave marker back to its original site.

"We just wanted to find its original home, and get it fixed and get it back there," she said. "Luckily now we've found it, it's where it belongs, and it should stay there. I like to think Mr. Williams is at peace. It was the right thing to do."