

Did You Know?

Two family mills helped shape the early history of southwest Atlanta?

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Willis Mill Road is named for Joseph Willis and his grist mill.

Willis Mill Road is the location of one of the four houses in Atlanta that pre-date the Civil War. Built around 1840, the house was owned by Joseph Willis, one of the earliest white pioneers to reside in this area. Joseph was born June 3, 1812, in Georgia after his family had migrated from North Carolina.

The Willis property was near the village of Utoy where a U.S. Post Office was established in 1822 and where a trading post existed. The area had previously been the home of Muscogee (Creek) Indians before the State of Georgia cleared them from their land pursuant to the Treaty of Indian Springs in 1821. Between 1821 and 1833, many white Georgians acquired land previously owned by the Creeks through seven land lotteries run by the State of Georgia which sold the land for seven or ten cents per acre. It is not clear whether the Willis family had already acquired their land or obtained it through the state lottery, but according to Willis, he lived in three counties without moving because the land started in the newly created Henry County in 1821, then transferred to the newly created Dekalb County in 1822, then transferred to the newly created Fulton County in 1853.

Joseph Willis and his family appear in five U.S. Census from 1830 through 1870 and in U.S. Property Tax Records in 1848 and 1870. In the 1830 and 1840 Census, he was married with two children. In 1848 Property Tax Records, he is reported to have 200 acres of property in the oak and hickory upland area. In the 1850 Census, Willis and his wife and their six children were living in Dekalb County. Four of the children were attending school. Willis is listed as a farmer with real estate valued at \$1,000.

At some point in time, Willis acquired a grist mill that was located on a tributary of South Utoy Creek about a mile south of the house. Farmers in the area brought corn to the mill to have it ground into flour and grits, traveling along what came to be known as the Willis Mill Road. The Willis Mill could be converted into a sawmill so timber could be made into boards.



Portion of 1872 map illustrating the siege of Atlanta. (Heron's Mill is spelled incorrectly.) Source: Library of Congress.

In the 1860 Census, Willis, who was widowed in 1859 and remarried in 1860, lived with his new wife and six of his ten children from the two marriages. His real estate had increased in value to \$2,300. Civil War maps show both the property owned by Willis and the Willis Mill which was situated on the dividing line between the Union and the Confederates during the siege of Atlanta in August 1864.

The Willis family declined to vacate the area during the ongoing battles. Instead, they, along with two other families, opted to dig a fifteen feet square by six feet high bomb shelter in their backyard. Following the Battle of

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Utoy Creek, Brigadier General Jacob Cox, the commander of the 3rd Division of the US Army, used the Willis house as its headquarters and gave it the nickname of "the bomb-proof house." General Cox wrote about the "bomb-proof" and its occupants in a letter he sent home on August 11, 1864, after looking down into the pit. He said the occupants were sitting on loose boards in the gloomy pit lit only by a candle. They included women, children four or five years old, a crippled old man and others who were old and gray, and an old woman who had been bedridden. Between fourteen and twenty-six occupants spent about three weeks huddled inside the shelter during the height of fighting in southwest Atlanta.



Wilbur Kurtz's illustration of Willis family bombproof shelter circa 1932.

During the war, a hospital was set up behind the Willis House. Victoria Lemos reports in her Archive Atlanta podcast about the Willis House ([Episode 34, 05/03/19](#)) that one of the surgeons at the hospital was Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a volunteer with the Union Army who was later captured by Confederate forces when she crossed enemy lines to treat the wounded. She is the only woman to ever be awarded the Medal of Honor.

Following the Civil War, on July 2, 1867, Willis appears in the Qualified Voters & Reconstruction Oath Book, having sworn that he had not held any elected office while rebelling against the government. In the 1870 Census, there are 10 people in the Willis household including Willis, his wife, five children, two older sisters and a farm laborer. The Property Schedule reports that he has 150 acres of land, 40 of which is improved, with a value of \$2,000. He is a farmer, growing corn and has livestock. Willis died on July 2, 1875 at the age of 63. It is unclear how long the house remained in the Willis family following his death.



Photograph of Willis family home taken by Wilbur Kurtz in 1932. Source: Digital Library of Georgia.

The Willis house is located at 1571 Willis Mill Road. It is currently owned by Lt. Col. Perry Bennett Jr, a historian who also owns Cascade Mansion, built in 1860 at 1530 Dodson Drive. In her podcast, Lemos describes her tour of the Willis house with Col. Bennett. The original footprint of the pre-Civil War log house and separate kitchen is visible in the basement and some of the original floor joists remain. After the war, Willis added two front rooms to the log house using home-made bricks. After World War II, the bricks were covered with the white stucco that is visible today and porches were added. The footprint of the bombproof is still visible in the back yard. A few pictures are posted on the Archive Atlanta website. In January 2023, the house was damaged by a fire. Repairs are ongoing.



Current image of the Willis house circa February 2025. Source: Google.

The Strategic Legacy of Herren's Mill in the Battle of Utoy Creek

Tucked into the quiet, wooded corridors of Flamingo Drive lies remnants of a forgotten landmark that once played a pivotal role during one of the lesser-known Civil War battles: the Battle of Utoy Creek. Herren Mill's, a humble grist mill powered by the waters of North Utoy Creek, not only supported the local community but also inadvertently helped shape the course of Union military operations during the Atlanta Campaign in 1864.

The Herren family, of German descent, migrated to Georgia from North Carolina following the forced removal of the Creek/Muscogee Indians. Edmond R. Herren, one of the area's earliest settlers, established the grist mill in a valley along North Utoy Creek—land that today lies beneath Georgia Power transmission lines that run adjacent to Flamingo Drive. The mill served a vital function for the agrarian community, grinding locally grown corn into meal and grits, a staple of the southern diet.

Because of the mill's importance to local food supply, the men of the Herren family were granted exemption from service in the Confederate Army. Yet despite this exemption, David Herren volunteered to join the Confederate cause, enlisting in the 42nd Regiment of the Georgia Infantry. His commitment led him to fight in several significant battles, including one close to home—the Battle of Ezra Church. During the war, David would lose a foot in the Battle of Bentonville, North Carolina, a lasting mark of his personal sacrifice.

While Herren's Mill served its community during peacetime, it unexpectedly became a military asset during wartime. In the summer of 1864, Union forces advancing on Atlanta faced a significant logistical challenge: Confederate troops had destroyed all area bridges across North Utoy Creek. The only viable crossing point was the dam at Herren's Mill. This dam became a critical passageway, allowing Union troops to maneuver from what is now Lionel Hampton Park uphill toward present-day Cascade Nature Preserve in their offensive against entrenched Confederate positions.

Even General William T. Sherman, commander of Union forces in the Atlanta Campaign, recognized the strategic value of the mill dam. Historical accounts suggest Sherman himself visited the site, crossing the very dam to observe firsthand the terrain his soldiers were navigating. It was a quiet but vital moment in the effort to encircle and capture Atlanta.



Photograph of Herren's Mill dam remnants on N. Utoy Creek photographed circa March 2025 by Stacey Boyd.

The legacy of Herren's Mill is closely tied to that of Willis Mill, connected not only by geography and their roles during the war but also through family bonds. In 1887, David Herren, son of Edmond Herren, married Elizabeth Willis, daughter of Joseph Willis—uniting two families who had each contributed, in their own ways, to the war effort and to post-war community life. They built a house and dairy farm near her father's house on Willis Mill Road on land he had given to them.

In a 1932 interview with renowned Civil War artist and historian Wilbur G. Kurtz, Elizabeth Willis Herren—born just after the war in 1866—described the location of the bombproof shelter on her family's property and shared

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vivid stories she had grown up hearing about life during the siege. She even remembered the names of 21 people who had regularly sought refuge there. Based on Mrs. Herren's recollection and his additional research, Kurtz drew an illustration of the bombproof included above and wrote an article about it for the Atlanta Constitution newspaper.



David and Elizabeth Herren's home photographed by Wilbur Kurtz circa 1932. Source: Digital Library of Georgia.

According to Kurtz's notes, preserved at the Atlanta History Center, Elizabeth explained that her father and some neighbors believed fleeing ahead of the advancing military would result in unbearable hardships, including the likely loss of their land. Faced with the daunting question of where to go and what to do upon arrival, they chose instead to stay and "weather the storm." In preparation, they constructed the bombproof shelter "some days before the fiery blasts began sweeping across the fields."

After the Civil War, David Herren continued his legacy of service—this time in civil life—as a dairy farmer, justice of the peace and an educator, eventually becoming a school principal. David died on January 8, 1925 at the age of 77. Elizabeth died on September 11, 1932 at her residence on Willis Mill Road from hip injuries she sustained at the family dairy farm when a cow knocked her down a few weeks after the Wilbur Kurtz interview.



Photograph of David E. Herren. Source: ancestry.com.

The Herrens are interred at Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta.



David and Elizabeth Herren's grave at Greenwood Cemetery. Source: findagrave.com.

The operational end date of the Herren's Mill remains uncertain, but echoes of its presence persist. Hikers along the Lionel Hampton trail may still glimpse remnants of the old mill dam in the stacked stone on the banks of North Utoy Creek, under the Georgia Power transmission towers—silent witnesses to a time when this sometimes quiet, sometimes torrent stream played a part in our nation's turning point.

Stories of Herren's Mill and Willis Mill are more than a tale of a local family businesses. It is a reminder that even the most unassuming places can hold strategic significance in the sweep of history—and that the land still whispers the names of those who lived, labored, and fought upon it.

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