

The German Willards Come to America

By Karin Kincaid

Good evening.

My name is Karin Kincaid, and I'm supposed to be your evening entertainment. After a long hard week of work and a big meal, I'm here to make sure you get a good night's sleep by listening to me talk about a bunch of people you've never heard of who lived a few hundred years ago. I was all set to come here and tell you all about my magnificent Williard family and how incredible they were. Then, this past May, my husband and I went to England. We visited all sorts of old and wonderful places, and when we were in Canterbury Cathedral, down in the crypts, we found a memorial placed there to the memory of Major Simon Willard. We also found a painting of a man named Villar (from the same root name as Willard) hanging in Leeds Castle. I began to get nervous. It would seem that your family is very well connected. I began to have visions of saying the wrong thing and creating an interfamily incident. You'd go back to calling us the Maryland dirt farmers, all of Karen Willard's good efforts on helping us get to know each other would fall apart, maybe even restarting the Civil War – and then your New England ancestors would call England, and my Mid-Atlantic ancestors would call Germany, and we would start World War III. I get a little carried away when I get nervous.

But seriously – I have been spending the past 3 months trying to figure out what to say tonight; how to communicate my passion about my family and their history to you. Most importantly, I've been trying to figure out how to condense 400 years into something less than a 4 hour lecture and to make sure I don't sound like the Book of Genesis with a list of "begats". It wasn't easy. But then I realized that there is one thing that our families have very much in common, despite their different background and origins. Both our stories reflect the story of this country and vividly demonstrate the heart and diversity of American history. The colonial pilgrimages, the French and Indian War, the quest for religious freedom, the Revolution, and the great westward expansion – All of these are American history, and Williard family history, too -- yours and mine.

You may have noticed that I just said Williard. That is was my grandmother's maiden name. I'll discuss the differences in the name in more detail later. I will also say that I have brought lots of materials with me for anyone to look through if you want more information about anything I talk about. My focus in my research has been on the "big picture" of the family as a whole. If any of this strikes a chord with anyone, I also have information from researchers who have focused in detail on certain segments of the family, and I can put you in touch with them.

So, after all that anxiety, let me begin. Let's start with the name, "The German Willard Family." It's a great nickname. I use it myself all the time. In fact, though, it is misleading. My Willards are German like I'm royalty. I once had an ancestor who was a Count. It's also a bit like my college roommate who was a 4th cousin to Diana, Princess of Wales. What does it all mean? Absolutely nothing. My Williards did not start in Germany, and they didn't stay there very long; although, by the time they came here, to Philadelphia, the family was speaking German. Ergo, they became The German Willards. And from now on, I would appreciate it if you all refer to me as "the Lady Karin".

The earliest ancestor that we have been able to trace was born in France, in the Sedan region, in 1635. His name was Nicolaus Vieillard (spelled V*I*E*I*L*L*A*R*D). Vieillar means “Very Old Man”. We don’t know much about Nicolaus. We know he had a brother named Pierre and a cousin named Pierre, but we don’t know which was which. Sometime, when Nicolaus was in his 20’s, he and the two Pierres fled France for Germany to escape religious persecution. They were Protestants, fleeing Catholic France. All 3 of the Vieillards married and had descendants. The focus of the so-called “German Willard” research has been on the descendants of Nicolaus, as they are the ones whose sons came to America and multiplied like rabbits. It is worth pausing to talk about one of the Pierres, though. Pierre Vieillard (one of them) married Catherine Boye’. Their daughter Anna Margretha married Abraham Cherdron, and their descendants settled due west of here in York County, PA, and include a great many of the German families that live in York County, PA today. Pierre’s grandson married into the Harbaugh family, which we will meet again in another story.

Back to Nicolaus and the Pierres. The Vieillards went to the Pfalz region of Germany, near Kaiserslautern. Apparently, there was a significant French settlement there, because we can find records from that time period for both the German Reformed Church and the French Reformed Church. Also, in 1663 in Germany, Nicolaus married Katherine Grosjean, also born in France. Katherine’s surname means “Fat John.” It makes me wonder what her family looked like.

Katherine and Nicolaus had seven children. Their eldest son was a man named Jakob, born in 1667, in Germany. It has been reported that he was a surgeon who died in 1717 at the age of 50, in Germany. It is with his wife and children that the American adventure of the Williard clan begins. Jakob’s wife was Mary Elizabeth Gordier (or Cordier), and she and Jakob had 3 children, Caspar, Dewalt (or Theobald), and Johann Peter (or Peter). Mary Elizabeth, as you probably have already guessed, was also of French descent, but she was born in Germany in 1682. That made her about 35 when her husband died.

For reasons we have yet to discover, Mary Elizabeth, her grown boys, their wives, their children, and a relative named Catherine packed up their belongings and left Germany for America. They did not all leave Germany together, but it seems reasonable that their journey was planned together, as they all reunited a couple of hours by car from where we are sitting tonight. This second migration of the family from their home came only about 100 years after Nicolaus was born in France. His daughter-in-law and grandchildren left Germany, and arrived at various times in the 1740s in Philadelphia. Even though the family was of French descent – and only one generation away from France on the Vieillard side, they were clearly very German by the time they arrived in Pennsylvania. They spoke German and were part of the German communities across the Mid-Atlantic.

We know quite a bit about Mary Elizabeth and her family, including where and when they entered into this country. I don’t know about you, but a list of ship names and passenger lists is about as riveting as the “begats.” Let’s just say that Mary Elizabeth came here with her son Peter and the relative Catherine. Catherine is a bit of an enigma. She is referred to in the records as the “sister” of Casper, Peter, and Dewalt, but she was born after Jakob died. We don’t know who Catherine Williard’s parents were. We do know she married first a man named

Bender and then a man named George Harbaugh after the death of her first husband. We know this for sure because she is referred to in the church records as “the widow Bender”. Now, as I said a few moments ago, a grandson of Pierre also married into the Harbaugh family, as did other members of the Williard clan. In many cases, the Williards and the Harbaughs are interchangeable. Now, being a die hard football fan, I find this fascinating, because Jim Harbaugh is a rather prolific NFL quarterback, and I think this means he is my cousin.

Back to Mary Elizabeth and her children. Caspar was the oldest, and he came over first. He settled in York County. Several family records, including that of your own Major Simon Willard, claimed that Caspar never married. Although we cannot prove to scientific certainty that this is untrue, it seems very likely that Caspar did marry and had several children, and his descendants populated southern and southwestern PA. The reason we think that Caspar did marry is the children of Mary Elizabeth (including Catherine Bender Harbaugh), as witnesses to baptisms of children born to a Caspar Williard in York County, PA. Coincidence? I doubt it.

Mary Elizabeth came over with her son, Peter, and his family. They came through the port of Philadelphia and apparently went west to be with Caspar, as they joined him in York County for a time. Dewalt also came through Philadelphia, with his family, and can briefly be found in York County. Eventually, everyone but Caspar and his family left York and went south to the Monacacy region of Maryland, where they became prominent members of the community and substantial landholders. The Monacacy region is due south of Gettysburg, along Route 15. If you go out the turnpike toward Gettysburg, and take Route 15 south, you will end up in Frederick in about an hour and a half. This is where the multiplying like rabbits part really begins. Pennsylvania was just a way-station on the road to populating the new continent.

The Monocacy region was another strong concentration of German peoples, and many of the old tombstones were written in German. Peter, his mother Mary Elizabeth, and his family settled north of Frederick near Thurmont. They, along with the Harbaughs, became members of the Graceham Moravian Church. Their tombstones can be found in Graceham Church Cemetery, and they are among the oldest found in Maryland. The original tombstones have been replaced by dedicated family members, but Mary Elizabeth’s stone once read “Our Mother” in German, a very fitting epitaph for her indeed, as we can number her descendants today in the several thousands – and those are only the ones we have found to count. She died in 1770 at the age of 88. At this point the original VIEILLARD name can still be found, although derivations are common, like “WILGAR”.

Peter’s first American-born son was Johann George, and he was a Moravian pioneer. He was one of the earliest members of the Moravian settlement in Salem, Carolina, now Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He, too, was a prolific ancestor, whose descendants number in the thousands, many, many of them in North Carolina. Like all children of pioneer spirit, his descendants didn’t stay in one place but spread out across the country. This branch of the family was spelling their surname W*I*L*L*Y*A*R*D and, of course, all variations thereof.

The children of Peter that stayed in Maryland were nearly as prolific, and a great many Williards in Maryland can trace their ancestors to Peter. The rest can trace their line back to Mary Elizabeth’s other son Dewalt, who is my ancestor. Unlike the rest of his family, Dewalt

did not become a Moravian. He remained a member of the German Reformed Church, as did his descendants. Dewalt also did not live in Graceham, but instead in Burkittsville, a short bit away from Frederick toward the west. Of all family in this time period, Dewalt's grave is the only one that is lost to us. Dewalt was 75 when he died. He was reportedly buried on his farm in Burkittsville, but his gravesite can no longer be found. According to the History of Frederick County Maryland, Dewalt's farmland in Burkittsville had apparently belonged to Josephus Harley, and it is on that land, in Mr. Harley's house near the spring, that the Burkittsville Congregation Reformed church had its origin. The land came to Dewalt in 1752, when his son Elias was 12 years old.

One of the current mysteries about Dewalt's family is exactly how many children he and his wife Anna had. There seems to be evidence in Germany that they had at least a few children who did not come to America with them, but we do not yet know why. The evidence is supported by the fact that Elias and his wife gave their children names that seem to be consistent with Elias' "lost" family in Germany. In any respect, for the family that came to America, Elias was the oldest son and the second child. His younger brother was named Dewalt Jr. Both Elias and Dewalt Jr. fought for the crown in the French and Indian War and for the Maryland Militia in the war for Independence. According to Revolutionary Patriots, Elias was a Second Lieutenant in the 34th Battalion of militia on June 11, 1776 under Captain George Poe, his brother in law.

Elias is buried in Middletown at the Reformed Church and, but for the marker placed by Daughters of the American Revolution, his gravestone would be virtually unidentifiable, as time, the winds and rain have worn it almost smooth.

A few descendants of, Elias, went west and became among the very first settlers in eastern Ohio, in Columbiana County, a short drive south of present-day Youngstown. Phillip, Dewalt's grandson, arrived in Ohio around 1805-1810. Phillip's family, like his cousins in Carolina, were having their name spelled W*I*L*L*Y*A*R*D, and pronounced "Williard." In Ohio, the Williard name is the more common, unlike in Maryland where the name quickly abbreviated even further to "WILLARD".

On his homestead, Phillip built a house. This house was later owned by Phillip's son John and, in later generations, referred to as the Williard "Mansion". John was known as "Squire John Willyard", presumably because he held so much land. Eight generations of Willyards lived in that house until it was torn down in the 1980s. We can't know today exactly what that house looked like, but Phillip's brother George also built a house in Middletown, Maryland, near Burkittsville. This house is known as "New Freedom". It is a federal style home that has been excellently restored by its current owner, James Bealle. Jim is not a Williard descendant, but he has become a friend to many of us and has a great interest in the family. The house has been registered as a National Historical Landmark, and Jim and his wife Sandy have restored it to the George Willard era (but they have not, I should add, removed the plumbing, electricity, or the kitchen appliances. After all, they do live there, and there is a pretty cool swimming pool on the property, too). In the summers, Frederick Community College conducts archeological digs at the old house, in the well and under the kitchen. One of the things they found that I found most interesting is a set of silverware buried beneath the kitchen floor. The

running theory is that when soldiers were coming through in the Civil War, the valuables were hidden under the floor and, for some reason, forgotten.

(Note: A report of the archeological digs may be seen at <http://www.fred.net/jbeall/pub1.html>)

In addition to migrations to North Carolina and Ohio, the Williards migrated to Virginia, West Virginia, Indiana, and points west, with a significant number ending up in Collingsworth, Texas. As the country expanded, so did the family. And as they expanded, they left their mark on country, and countryside. The Williards saw conflict in the French and Indian War, in the Revolution, in World War II, and almost certainly every conflict in-between. They founded Heidelberg College, in Tiffin, Ohio. They were US Senators, lawyers, and actually held some respectable positions, too.

As we all know, though, it is the stories, and the tangible reminders, that make family history so captivating. I want to tell you a few of those stories. In the George Willard House that is owned by Jim Bealle, there is a window in the bedroom containing original glass from George's day. In the lower left-hand corner of the window, there are initials scratched into the corner. Jim believes that they came to be there when Jacob Remsburg came to visit and to propose to George's daughter Elizabeth Willard. Apparently, before she agreed to marry Jacob, Elizabeth decided to test the ring to make sure it was real.

It also seems that by the late 1800s, the supply of unique names for Williard children was starting to run low. (Although, if you read the church records and find out there actually were more than two boys named "Dewalt Willard" in the area, it may be that the name supply has been running short for a lot longer than just since the 1800s.) Anyway, there were three first cousins born in Columbiana County, Ohio in the late 1800s, all of whom were named John Williard. I don't know what it was about those ancestors and that name, "John" but there sure were a lot of them. These John Williards all, thankfully, had different middle names, so for their entire lives, they were known as "John N.," "John L." and "John A." My grandmother used to tell stories about her childhood, and she never referred to an "Uncle John" but always to an "Uncle John N."

There is also some evidence that, in the present day, this naming trend has gotten even worse. My great grandfather was named William Cool Williard. He named his first son, my great uncle, William Clarence Williard. Thus, there were two "WCWs" in the family, with different middle names. Uncle Bill followed the trend by naming his son William C. Williard. By that time, there were too many Bill Williards, and far too many WCWs, so we all just called him "Three." That is a nickname that, to his chagrin, he still bears to this day.

The William Cool Williard family has, for most of my life, been excited about being a "family" and all that being a family means. My grandmother had six sisters and two brothers, and they have been getting together with their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren once a year since the 1950s. In my lifetime, this Williard reunion has generally been on Fathers Day, and almost always around Canfield, Ohio. Although recently, the number of attendees sits around 50, there have been many a prior reunion in which the number of people that showed up were so great that we all had to wear nametags that not only gave our names, but how we fit into the family. In those years, I was known as "Evie's granddaughter." In retrospect, it was an

improvement to the years when great-grandma Doris called me “Connie” thinking I was my mother, and my cousins called me “Cheryl” thinking I was my sister. (They are sitting over there, by the way.) This mix up isn’t just senility, though. In looking at all my relatives, it is very clear that the Williard genes are strong. As my mother has often said, we have one man’s face and one woman’s face, and you can see it at any age, any weight, and with any color hair. It is certainly true that many of us look more like siblings than cousins, and for the siblings, the resemblance can be extraordinary.

One year, in the 1970s, my grandmother and her sisters decided to get together to evaluate, physically, what it means to be a “true Williard.” They took a census of the hundred or so people who were at the reunion that year, and they concluded that a “true Williard” had light brown hair, blue eyes, a very big nose, could cackle like a witch when laughing and had a propensity to snort when laughing or when surprised. I was graded “near Williard” because my nose wasn’t big enough.

I always thought it was the William C. Williard family that had such strong genes so that we all looked alike. In recent years, however, we have learned that that the Williards at large have looked alike for hundreds of years. I have pictures here on my computer of Uncle John N. and his two brothers that are virtually indistinguishable, and which are extremely similar to that of their grandfather, the Squire. So, it’s the John Williard family that looks so much alike and has such strong genes. Or at least, that is as far as we’ve got pictures.

In connection with my study of the George Willard family that lived in New Freedom, Squire John’s uncle’s family, I began corresponding with George Willard’s several times descendant. We agreed to meet one day and visit the old farmhouse. Not knowing how I would recognize him in a public place, we agreed to meet at the old cemetery in Graceham, because, while public, there probably wouldn’t be a ton of people wandering around. My mother and I arrived at the cemetery first, and while we were photographing some tombstones, we were very surprised to see my mother’s first cousin Brian Kirby walk into the cemetery. Last time we checked Brian was in Houston, Texas and had no interest in genealogy whatsoever. This cemetery was an extremely strange place for him to be. Well, there is no point in dragging this out any further, as I’m sure you have already guessed, this was not Brian, but George’s many great grandson. He was a cousin, but definitely not a first cousin. The family resemblance was still strong even that far back.

So, that brings us to the present day, from 1600’s in France, to 21st century America. We’ve come a long way from the days of Major Simon Willard and the Maryland Dirt Farmers. Nicolaus was my 9 great grandfather, 10 generations ago. Mary Elizabeth has 10 or more generations of descendants in this country, which, as you know, represents an almost uncountable number of people. But I have one more story to tell.

This past Father’s day, at the annual reunion, my grandmother’s sister handed me a printout of a history book about the Allegheny Valley. In it, she had highlighted biographies of some Willard men. These men were from England, and were related to Major Simon Willard and his brother-in-law John Davis. When I told her this was not our family, she was disappointed and offered to throw all the research away. My mother, though, took the pages

from me, flipped them over, and I read the following text, “Richard Willard, father of Margery, the wife of Captain Dolar Davis, lived at Horsmonden, England, it being claimed that he was a lineal descendant of Richard Willard, Baron of the Cinque Ports, in the time of Richard II. The Willard family of Eastbourne, Sussex, England, originally named Villiard, came from Caen, Normandy” France. Perhaps we aren’t so far apart after all.