

Museum Around the Corner
Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Willtown Part 1 ©

Before Georgetown was founded in 1729, the community of Willtown was the center of population. An article by Margorie Rhem describes the history and growth of the area.

“Willtown, settled in 1698, was located on Black Mingo Creek, and the first village settled in that area. It was located in a rich and prosperous section and had an excellent waterway to the sea. James Fowler, who was a merchant in Charleston, opened a trading post in Willtown in 1750. He exchanged tape, buttons, rum and molasses for cow hides, deer skins and tobacco the people of Williamsburg brought. Another settler was Dr. John Augustus Finke, who began the practice of “physics”. He practiced medicine for everyone in a thirty mile radius of Willtown. From his records, one can find the names of nearly everyone that lived in that section up until the time he died.

Even though Willtown was rather large and prosperous at that time, a man from England described it as a miserable little hamlet. It had about thirty houses and eight stores. The merchants of Willtown had large storehouses and landings along the creek with lines of sloops, flatboats and pettiaguas that transported country produce to Georgetown and then their schooners carried the produce to Europe and brought back manufactured supplies for Willtown. Even though the town was about thirty miles from Georgetown, one could buy almost anything that could be found in large city markets. Willtown also had a watermill and a large gristmill located on Jack’s Creek.

The old stage road ran through the middle of town. There were five hundred and eighty one acres of land in Willtown. On one side of the main street there were about four or five warehouses and a road leading to a landing on Jack’s Creek. People from miles around, as well as the people of Willtown, would bring their corn to be ground at the mill. Between the gristmill and the landing the remains of an old spring can still be seen. On the opposite side of the street, Cleland Belin built his three-story house. Some other houses were located behind his and another landing was located behind Mr. Belin’s house.

The first post office established in Williamsburg District was built nearby. Willtown lay on the post route which Benjamin Franklin established from Savannah, Georgia, to Wicasset, Maine. Since Willtown was on this post route from North to South, it became a stopping place for travelers. Many cultured people lived in the community, it became one of the best known points in South Carolina. Patrick Dollard, a witty Irishman and a genial host, had an inn here. Many travelers stopped on the way to Georgetown and other places. Bishop Asbury stopped here on the way to Georgetown and other places. He stayed at Patrick Dollard’s Inn on his first trip to South Carolina. Aaron Burr stopped here frequently on his way to visit his daughter, Theodosia, who was the wife of Governor Alston of South Carolina.

On every Regimental Muster Day at Willtown, the Governor of South Carolina came, since it was a valuable opportunity for his own political future. The governor usually stayed with Mr. Belin. After the official and formal social events of the day were finished, the bullies tried their strength and the district champion for the year was chosen. Every section of the district had its own bully. The bullies brought out its champion and by a process of elimination in actual fist fights, the bully for the whole district was determined. These bully contests created great excitement and interest for a long time before and after the contest. Sometimes brigade reviews were held and bullies from each regiment had fights to find the champion, who usually received a laurel wreath as his award.

In 1810, Cleland Belin (pronounced "blaine"), who was about eighteen years old, came to Willtown from Georgetown. His mother had died and his father remarried. Cleland and his stepmother couldn't get along so he left and came to Willtown to live with his uncle, John Screven. He became a Baptist and in 1843, built Old Belin's Church.

Mr. Belin was a very wealthy man and owned a beautiful home in Willtown. It is said that his home was finished and furnished very much like a palace. Using his great mechanical ability, he supervised the erection of his house. He required his builders to finish even its hidden corners with the greatest of care. Probably no other house in South Carolina up to this time was furnished more perfectly. He gathered many books, curiosities, and objects of art from all over the world. There were twelve bedrooms in his house. In each bedroom, he had a grandfather clock out of which came little fairies to dance at every hour. These clocks were set successively, five minutes ahead of each other so that every five minutes in some room of the house little fairies would be dancing on their stages."