

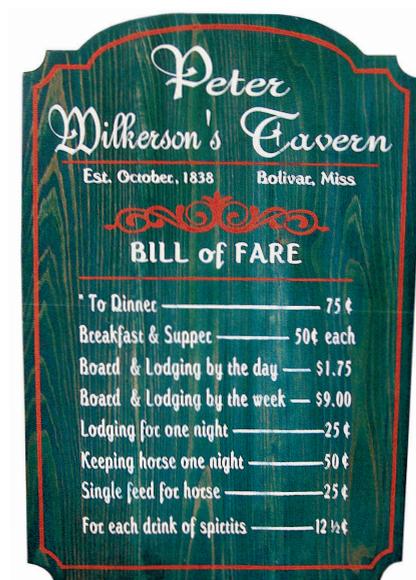
THOMAS JEFFERSON WILKERSON | DORCAS ELIZABETH CORNELIUS

In 1850 **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807–1868)**, a 43-year-old born in Kentucky during the time Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was president of the United States, married 19-year-old **Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius (1830–1897)**.

Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson was the only child of **Peter Wilkerson (1782–1859)**¹ and **Polly Miller (1783–1807/15)**, the oldest of 12 children of **Francis Miller (1748–1838)**.² Peter Wilkerson migrated from Kentucky to Mississippi in 1825. He was among the first settlers in Yazoo County, a part of which became Washington County in 1827. Peter Wilkerson was a founder of Washington County and was its first justice of the peace.

In 1832 Peter Wilkerson was the first owner of land that he purchased from the U.S. government on lower Choctaw Bend, a curved area along the Mississippi River. His plantation, called Black Bayou, was in the northern part of Washington County and became a part of Bolivar County in 1836. Thus, Peter Wilkerson was also a founder of Bolivar County, where he ran a tavern in its first county seat, also known as Bolivar.

Before he died at age 77, in 1859, Peter sold Black Bayou Plantation to his son, Thomas Jefferson, for \$1.00 and moved to Coahoma County, which is just north of Bolivar County.



This sign, created recently by my first cousin Princella Wilkerson Nowell (also a third great-grandchild of Peter Wilkerson), is based on a Bolivar County Board of Supervisors book.

The Cornelius family³ came to America in 1665 from Holland and first lived in Lancaster County, Virginia. In the late 18th century, **Rowland Cornelius (1755–1822)**, the grandfather of Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius, migrated from Virginia to Franklin County, Georgia. In 1809, he moved to Madison County, Alabama, with his son, **David Cornelius (1800–1836)** who left a will with an appraisal of his property.

Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson and his wife, Elizabeth Cornelius, had three sons and one daughter (the daughter, **Irene Wilkerson [1855–1856]**, died at age 10 months). Each of the sons was given a distinguished historical name. The eldest, **Thomas Jefferson (Tommie) Wilkerson Jr. (1853–1875)**, died at age 22. The second son, **George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917)**, was my great-grandfather.

The third son, **Charles Lee Wilkerson (1866–1924)**, married twice and lived in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Neither Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson Sr. nor his son George Washington Wilkerson fought in the Civil War. The former was too old (54) and the latter too young (four) when the war began in 1861.

Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson died at age 60, about three years after the end of the Civil War. Almost two years after his death, his 39-year-old widow (with three sons, ages 16, 12, and three) married Oscar Shelby (1843–1909), the 26-year-old overseer of Black Bayou Plantation. It has been reported that Oscar Shelby⁴ became much disliked by Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson's sons.

Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby died at age 66 at the plantation. She was the last Wilkerson buried in the family's Indian Mound cemetery at Black Bayou. She is there alongside her first husband, Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson.

The tombstones for Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson and Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby are at the site of Black Bayou Plantation. Her age on the tombstone (63) does not agree with family records. The inscription is from Matthew 5:8. It says, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God."



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1. PETER WILKERSON: THE PATRIARCH, HIS WIVES AND PLANTATIONS

Peter Wilkerson (1782-1859), my third great-grandfather, was born in Virginia (perhaps Culpeper County) during the American Revolutionary War. He moved to Jessamine County and central Kentucky probably in the 1790s, and on July 23, 1802, he married **Polly Miller (1783-1807/15)** there. They had one son, **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807-1868)**.

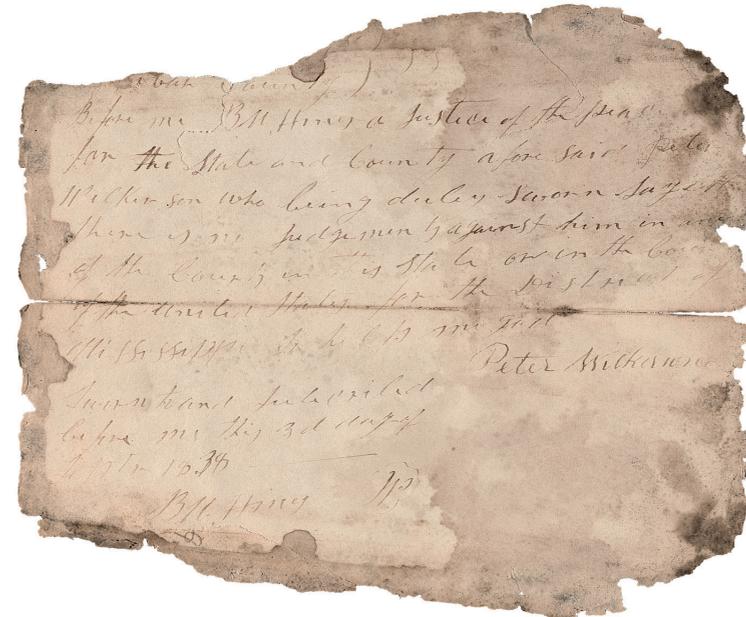
In 1815, while living in Union County, Kentucky (in east Kentucky on the Ohio River), Peter Wilkerson married Rebecca Sibley (d. after 1836). In 1820 Peter Wilkerson and Rebecca Sibley Wilkerson sold her brother, Isaac Sibley, a number of town lots in Rawley (Raleigh) in Union County, Kentucky. They also sold him half of a ferry owned by Peter Wilkerson and David Lash, who was married to Sarah Sibley, Rebecca's sister.

In 1825 Peter and Rebecca Sibley Wilkerson moved to Yazoo County, Mississippi, probably with Peter's 18-year-old son, Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson. In 1827 Washington County was formed out of Yazoo County, and Peter Wilkerson became the new county's first justice of the peace.

One of Peter's early plantations was called Highland Plantation on Warfield Point, south of present-day Greenville. It was the second highest land (135 feet) in Washington County. Another Wilkerson property was Eutopia (1,138 acres) in Bolivar County, a plantation that Peter Wilkerson owned with Zachariah C. Offutt (1808-1872).

It was sold in 1870. Black Bayou Plantation, a few miles north of Eutopia on the lower Choctaw Bend of the Mississippi River, was purchased about 1832. It was the Wilkerson family home site for many years. Before he died, Peter Wilkerson sold Black Bayou, about 1,700 acres, to his son, Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson, for \$1.00.

In 1836 Peter Wilkerson became an official of the newly formed Bolivar County, immediately north of Washington County. He was one of that county's original 17 taxpayers and opened a tavern there. We have a sworn affidavit signed by Peter Wilkerson in Bolivar County in 1838.



The affidavit reads: "Before me Bill Haines a Justice of the Peace for the State and County aforesaid, Peter Wilkerson who being duly sworn says there are no judgments against him in the Courts in this State or in the Country of the United States for the District of Mississippi so help me God."

[Signed] Peter Wilkerson

Sworn and _____ before me this third day of Sept., 1838

In the 1840s, Peter Wilkerson, my third great-grandfather, married his third wife, **Elizabeth (Betsy) Cornelius Stewart (1798-_____)**, the daughter of my fourth great-grandfather, **Rowland Cornelius (1755-1822)**. Betsy Cornelius Stewart had five children and was the widow of John Stewart (1798-1839) of Coahoma County, Mississippi.

In the 1850 census, the household of Peter Wilkerson, noted as a Virginia-born farmer, included his 52-year-old wife Elizabeth (Betsy) and her 17-year-old daughter, Margaret Stewart (1833-_____). Also included was Elizabeth's 18-year-old niece, **Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius (1830-1897)**,* who married Peter Wilkerson's son, Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson, in 1850.

After Peter Wilkerson sold Black Bayou Plantation to his son, he moved to Coahoma County, where he became an agent for swampland and died in 1859, at age 77.

*This census suggests that Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius was born in 1832.

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2. FRANCIS M. MILLER: MY FOURTH GREAT-GRANDFATHER

Francis M. Miller (1748–1838), the father-in-law of **Peter Wilkerson (1782–1859)**, had one of the longest life spans of any of my ancestral grandparents. He died at age 90. He was born in Culpeper County, Virginia (north-central), and fought in the American Revolutionary War (1775–83).

During the Revolutionary War, in either 1781 or 1782, Francis Miller married **Elizabeth Freeman (1763–1845)**. They had 12 children, the oldest being my third great-grandmother **Polly Miller (1783–1807/15)**.

About 1790 Francis Miller moved with his family to Jessamine County in central Kentucky. From various records, we know that the Miller family was quite close to the Wilkersons. Therefore, it is possible that Peter Wilkerson's family came to Kentucky from Culpeper County, Virginia, around the same time.

Francis M. Miller's Revolutionary War service is revealed in his application for a veteran's pension over 50 years after the war.

Pension Record of Francis Miller, Virginia, W 8,459

Jessamine County ... 19 August 1833 personally appeared in Court Francis Miller, resident said county, aged eighty-five [85]. Makes following declaration to obtain benefits under Act. of 1832. In 1780 he entered service as a draft soldier and moved from Culpeper County, Va. where he resided toward the South; served two months; honorably discharged, not able to state by whom, now being old and frail of memory. In the spring of 1781 he served under another tour of two months under Capt. John Waugh and Col. James Slaughter from Culpeper. Went to Petersburg where I saw the smoke of the warehouse fired by the British [sic]. Marched from thence to a place called Broadway. Discharged; Drafted again in fall of 1781, was stationed at the mouth of Two Rivers Creek [near Williamsburg] where I saw a British Vessel capture one of ours & was then sent to the Governor [Thomas Jefferson] as an express [messenger], ordered 7-miles further up York River where we were stationed thence I was in hearing of the cannon at the Siege of York [October 1781] for 16 or 18 days; when York was surrendered, I was then discharged and sent home. I served this tour two months.

Francis X Miller
mark

Francis Miller died on October 16, 1838. His will is recorded on October 19, 1839, in Jessamine County, Kentucky. He left most of his property to his wife, Elizabeth, and cash amounts of between \$500 and \$1,500 to each of his children. One specific provision of his will is shown below:

9th: I give and bequeath to my grandson, Jefferson Wilkerson, the sum of five hundred dollars to be paid on the final distribution of my estate and in case of the death of the said Wilkerson without heirs the said sum of five hundred dollars will be refunded to my heirs.

Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807–1868), my great-great-grandfather, was 31 years old and a bachelor in Mississippi when his grandfather Francis M. Miller died.

Francis M. Miller and Elizabeth Freeman Miller are both buried in the Miller Cemetery, Snowden Lane, in Jessamine County, Kentucky.



Elizabeth Freeman Miller's tombstone at the Miller Cemetery.



Francis Miller's tombstone at the Miller Cemetery. The dates are incorrect.

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3. THE CORNELIUS FAMILY

My fourth great-grandfather **Rowland Cornelius (1755-1822)** was born in Culpeper County, Virginia, and served in the 14th Virginia Regiment during the American Revolutionary War. His male antecedents are **Rowland Cornelius (1728-1821)**, **Rowland Cornelius (1698-1765)**, and **Rowland Cornelius (1650-1727)**, who came from Holland to Virginia in the 17th century.

In 1797 Rowland Cornelius bought 260 acres of land in Franklin County, northeast Georgia. In 1809 he moved to Madison County (Huntsville) in north Alabama, where he became a substantial landowner. In 1819 he is recorded as the owner of 11 slaves.

Rowland Cornelius (the fourth one) first married Phebe (1766-1790) and had three children. With his second wife, **Eleanor Watkins (1777-1861)**, he had ten children. Their first child was **Elizabeth (Betsy) Cornelius (1798-_____)**, who became the third wife of **Peter Wilkerson (1782-1859)**, my third great-grandfather.

Rowland Cornelius's second child was **David Cornelius (1800-1836)**, my third great-grandfather, who married **Nancy Miller (1809-1860)** on December 22, 1824.

Among their four children was **Dorcias Elizabeth Cornelius (1830-1897)**, who in 1850 married **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807-1868)** in Coahoma County, Mississippi. My great-great-grandparents Thomas Jefferson and Dorcias Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson were undoubtedly introduced to one another by Peter Wilkerson's third wife, Elizabeth Cornelius Stewart.

David Cornelius, my third great-grandfather, died at age 35, on May 10, 1836. His will was signed on March 9, 1836.

The State of Alabama, Lawrence County. In the name of God, Amen!

I David Cornelius of the State and County aforesaid (being weak of body) though being of sound disposing mind and memory, reflecting on the uncertainty of life, the certainty of death, and knowing that it is appointed for all men to die once; do make and ordain, publish and declare this my last will and Testament.

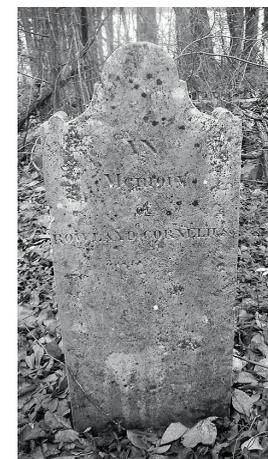
In the first place I commit my soul into the hands of God who gave it, and my body I wish to be buried in a decent like manner at the discretion of my executors.

And as respect to my worldly goods, and chattels wherewith it hath pleased God to bless me with it is my will and wish that they may be disposed of in the following manner. That is to say: it is my Will and wish that my wife, Nancy, should keep and retain all my estate until my youngest child is twenty one years old, if she remains a widow. Should she marry it is my will and wish that my estate should be divided according to law. / This is the ninth day of March in the year of our Lord, one Thousand eight hundred and thirty six. / Signed, sealed and declared as my last Will and Testament, the day and date above written.*

On June 2, 1836, an appraisal of the personal belongings of David Cornelius was presented to the court.

1 yoke oxen	\$35.00	1 turning lathe	10.00
1 yoke oxen	30.00	1 box of tools	40.00
13 heads of cattle	73.00	1 crop cut saw	4.00
58 head of hogs	170.00	2 pair cart wheel hubs	2.50
1 ox cart & Yoke	30.00	1 cutting knife and work bench	2.00
(something missing)		4 bee hives	4.00
1 lot of timber	1.50	1 mare & colt	30.00
1 gig and harness	35.00	1 bay mare	60.00
1 scythe & cradle	2.00	1 bay horse	35.00
50 barrels of bread		1 lot plantation	
corn for use of family	125.00	utensils	25.00
500# bacon for use of family	62.50	1 negro boy Alfred	900.00
1 clock	15.00	1 do Frank Anderson	400.00
1 bed stead & furniture	30.00	1 do Robert	450.00
1 ditto	30.00	1 do Hery	400.00
1 ditto	20.00	1 girl Jane	300.00
1 bed stead (tunnel)	10.00	1 girl Rachel	530.00
1 safe	5.00	1 girl Nancy &	
1 china press	25.00	boy Alek	900.00
1 large looking glass	6.00	1 saddle, Bridle	
1 bureau	20.00	& martingale	15.00
1 shot gun	20.00	1 loom	10.00
1 rifle and shot bag	10.00	1 lot kitchen	
4 trunks	4.00	furniture, pots,	
1 dressing table	2.00	ovens etc.	12.00
1 pair andirons	2.00	1 lot chairs	4.50
1 cradle & bed	5.00	Tongs, shovel	
1 pair large steelyards	3.00	and irons & flat	
1 ditto small	1.00	irons	1.50
		1 table	1.00
		1 broad axe	3.50
		Total	\$4,234.50

*She remarried in 1839.



This tombstone marks the grave of Rowland Cornelius. It is over 170 years old and is the only one standing in the Cornelius cemetery in Huntsville, Alabama.

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4. OSCAR L. SHELBY: AN HONORABLE OPPORTUNIST

In February 1868, **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807–1868)** died at Black Bayou Plantation at age 60. His wife, **Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson (1830–1897)**, was thus a 37-year-old widow with three young sons, ages 14, 10, and one. In January 1870, almost two years after her husband died, Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson, at age 39, married Oscar L. Shelby (1843–1909), the 26-year-old overseer of Black Bayou Plantation.

In 1875 Dorcas Elizabeth Wilkerson Shelby's oldest son, **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson Jr. (1853–1875)**, died at age 22. In 1879 Oscar and Elizabeth Shelby petitioned the Bolivar County Court asking for one third of Black Bayou Plantation, then 1,762 acres of land. It is likely they were claiming the portion owned by her son, who probably had died without a will.

The court records noted that his brothers, **George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917)**, then 22 years old, and **Charles Lee Wilkerson (1866–1924)** (13 years old) did not appear in court, and the Shelbys' petition was granted.

In a book entitled *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi—Part 2*, we have learned the following about Oscar L. Shelby. This was probably written in the 1890s.

Honorable Oscar L. Shelby, merchant and planter, Huntington, Mississippi was born in Henderson County in west Tennessee in 1843. In 1858, he [Oscar L. Shelby] came to Mississippi, clerked at Bolivar Landing until 1861 and then returned to Tennessee. That same year, he entered the company of Henderson sharpshooters, afterwards attached to the 27th Tennessee Infantry, and was a participant in the desperate Battles of Shiloh and Corinth. He was in the Battle of Murphysborough, Atlanta, Lovejoy Station, Franklin, and Nashville where he was captured. At that time, he was a first lieutenant, and acting captain. He was retained until June 25, 1865, at Fort Delaware, Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River.

After the Civil War he then came to Mississippi, locating in Bolivar County where he was soon appointed County Assessor. He then clerked for one year, and in 1870, was married to Mrs. Wilkerson, nee Cornelius, a native of Alabama. Later still, he embarked in merchandising at Wilkerson [now Huntington] under the firm

name of Shelby & Co., but carries a small stock of goods, mainly to furnish his hands. He is also interested in planting, and has control of 1,000 acres with 600 acres under cultivation. The town of Huntington has been built on the estate.

He [Oscar L. Shelby] was justice in the seventies [1870s], then supervisor, and in 1889 he was elected a member of the lower house of the state legislature. He is for general improvement, but an opponent of rings and cliques. Although not perhaps a brilliant man in any respect, Mr. Shelby is exemplary in his conduct and example, and is most highly esteemed by the people of his county. He is a member of the Masonic fraternity, the Knights of Pythias and the Knights of Honor. The Shelby family is a very old and prominent one, and has produced many men of note and distinction, after whom towns and counties in both Tennessee and Kentucky are named.

Oscar L. Shelby outlived his wife, Elizabeth Wilkerson Shelby, who died in 1897, before the relocating of the Mississippi River levee, which caused the destruction of Black Bayou Plantation. My mother (who was born three days after Oscar Shelby died) made the following comments in a 1991 letter.

It has been handed down by word of mouth that none of the family liked Oscar Shelby. My father [J. P. Wilkerson, Sr.] told me when his grandmother [Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby] died on January 12, 1897, he [Oscar Shelby] got all of everything she had, including furniture, books, Bibles, etc.

And so, the heirlooms of three generations of Wilkersons at Black Bayou ended up with Oscar L. Shelby. Elizabeth, however, was buried on the Indian mound at Black Bayou Plantation with her first husband, Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson. Oscar Shelby died at age 65 and is buried at Beulah, Mississippi. His grave stone says he was born March 22, 1843, and died February 19, 1909. It reads: "Though Lost to Sight to Memory Dear." It was erected by his niece Anna Belle Shelby.