

GEORGE WASHINGTON WILKERSON | CATHERINE D. ADAMS

On February 6, 1878, **George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917)** of Black Bayou Plantation married **Catherine D. (Kittie) Adams (1860–1916)**, a 17-year-old from Nashville. They were married at the Church Street Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

In 1876, two years before they married, George Washington Wilkerson was a boarding student living in the home of Catherine Adams’s mother, **Ida Princella Morton Adams (1822–1888)**. We have tuition receipts that show that he was attending Vanderbilt Prep School in Nashville, Tennessee. Undoubtedly, this is how he met Catherine Adams.

After his marriage, George Washington and his brother, Charles Lee, farmed Black Bayou Plantation with their mother, **Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby (1830–1897)**. In 1951 my mother got a letter¹ from an 81-year-old black woman who had worked for the Wilkerson family at Black Bayou. In the letter, she gives her recollections of the Wilkersons at the plantation in their time.

In 1886, when the railroads came to the area, the Wilkersons incorporated a Mississippi river railroad town called Huntington.² It was just across the river from Arkansas City, Arkansas. Huntington no longer exists.



Over the next 10 years, the decision was made (ultimately by the Mississippi Supreme Court) to build a new levee several miles to the east and thus effectively destroy 14 plantations, including Black Bayou. No compensation was granted. With a new levee completed in 1900, Black Bayou, like Huntington, was lost to the Mississippi River.³

George Washington Wilkerson as a young man.



George Washington Wilkerson married Catherine Adams in 1878.

George Washington and Catherine Adams Wilkerson had six children: two boys and two girls who lived to maturity; and twin daughters who died in infancy in 1900. It appears from family records that they lived their lives in both Mississippi and Nashville.

In the latter part of her life, Catherine Adams Wilkerson became ill* and moved to Nashville. In 1916, at age 55, she died at the home of her brother-in-law, Francis Neville (Frank) Boensch (1847–after 1910). She is buried in an unmarked grave in his plot at Mount Olivet Cemetery. Frank Boensch was married to Catherine Adams Wilkerson’s sister **Josephine S. Adams Boensch (1850–1913)**.

After his plantation was lost, George Washington Wilkerson moved up the river to Scott, Mississippi, a few miles away. He died in 1917 at age 59 and is buried in the cemetery at Greenville, Mississippi. Unlike his wife, George Washington Wilkerson’s burial site is marked by a quite prominent tombstone.⁴

**She had a stroke in 1912.*

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1. RECOLLECTIONS OF BLACK BAYOU BY A “COLORED NURSE”

In February 1951, my mother received a letter from Anne Lindsay (1870–after 1951), who is described by Mother as a “colored nurse” for my mother’s father, **Jefferson P. Wilkerson (1878–1945)**, when he was a child at Black Bayou. Anne Lindsay, 81 years old at the time of her letter, was living in North Little Rock, Arkansas.

Mrs. Kittie Bryan,

this annie yas man truly did nurse your deer father and my mother worked for Mrs. Kittie, your granmother and your granfather Capt. George Wilkerson and Mr. Tommie Wilkerson was the oldest son of my Mrs. Elizabeth Wilkerson. She was never married before she married your granfather. Your granfather owned all of the place called hunington from the River back five miles he owned about 300 colored people his house had a fish pond up over the too storie and when the River come so close to the leave the new levie was built. Then Mr. Charley Wilkerson the third son had his new house built over on the other farm and made a little town it was belong to them and your father. It was just 3 son and one girl she died young she was name miss irina Wilkerson. The Wilkerson owned a large store on the old place and it was name Wilkerson landing they never bought nothing on credit everything came cod. the kat adams a big boat run from Memphis teen it was owen by your fathers mother, also the dean adams a big boat, they sold them and Mr. Charley Wilkerson owen a big family boat it is a large family of them.

thank you and God bless you and your family i am 81 years old as of gannuary.

The names mentioned in the letter above are identified below.

“Mrs. Kittie Bryan”—my mother, **Catherine Cameron Wilkerson Bryan (1909–2002)**

“Mrs. Kittie”—**Catherine Adams Wilkerson (1860–1916)**, Mother’s grandmother

“Capt. George Wilkerson”—**George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917)**,

Mother’s grandfather

“Tommie Wilkerson”—**Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson Jr. (1853–1875)**, Mother’s great-uncle

“Mrs. Elizabeth Wilkerson”—**Dorcas Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson (1830–1897)**,

Mother’s great-grandmother

“Your grandfather”—**Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807–1868)**, she meant great-grandfather

“Charley Wilkerson”—**Charles Lee Wilkerson (1866–1924)**, Mother’s great-uncle

“Miss Irina Wilkerson”—**Irene Wilkerson (1855–1856)**

2. THE RISE AND FALL OF HUNTINGTON

In 1885, after 20 years of post–Civil War hardships, the Mississippi Delta began to show signs of economic uplift. The railroads were coming to the Delta. They gave competition to steamboats on the river and allowed faster travel to Memphis and New Orleans. New towns had sprung up along the railroads; one of them was Huntington. My grandfather **Jefferson Pinckney Wilkerson Sr. (1878–1945)** was born there.

A railroad called the L.N.O.T. (Louisville New Orleans and Texas) ran north and south, passing 10 miles east of Greenville, where the new town of Leland was established. Leland was named for Leland Stanford (1824–1893), a railroad magnate who founded Stanford University. It was decided to create a branch line from the town of Leland to the Mississippi River, 22 miles away. The new rail line would match up with the Iron Mountain Railroad that ended at the Mississippi River at Arkansas City, Arkansas. On the Mississippi side of the river was Wilkerson Landing on the family’s plantation property.



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In 1886 **Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby (1830–1897)** and her two sons, **George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917)**, then 29 years old, and **Charles Lee Wilkerson (1866–1924)** (20 years old), created at Wilkerson Landing an incorporated town called Huntington, at a site they named Huntington Point. Both the town and the point were named for Collis P. Huntington (1821–1900), a railroad baron who owned the L.N.O.T. railroad. At Huntington a railroad incline was built to move the trains down the bank of the Mississippi River and onto a railroad ferry. The ferry carried the trains across the river to another railroad incline on the Arkansas side of the river.

Huntington, unfortunately, prospered for only a few years. In 1890 the high waters of the Mississippi River broke the levee at Huntington, and the railroad incline was washed away into the river. After the levee was relocated in 1900, massive caving over the years caused the Mississippi River to move east of the old site of the town of Huntington. Today that site is actually located on the Arkansas side of the river.

3. BLACK BAYOU PLANTATION IS LOST

After the 1890 Mississippi levee break at Huntington, it was recommended that a new levee be constructed several miles to the east of the present one. It was a proposition that would have the effect of destroying 14 plantations (including Black Bayou), as well as the town of Huntington.

Coincidentally, my maternal grandfather, **John Malcolm Montgomery (1841–1910)**, was a member of the levee board at the time that relocation of the levee was being considered. He voted against it.

However, for the next 10 years, the issue was fought in the courts and concluded by the Mississippi Supreme Court. It was finally decided that “for the good of the many over the few,” a new levee would be built farther back from the river. Black Bayou would be lost and no compensation would be awarded.

The new levee, completed about 1900, was called The Huntington Short Line. Ironically, The Huntington Short Line begins at a place called Mound Landing, the exact point where the Mississippi River levee collapsed at the beginning of America’s greatest river flood, the 1927 flood.

There is still today a family cemetery on an Indian mound at the site of Black Bayou plantation. My great-great-grandparents **Thomas Jefferson Wilkerson (1807–1868)**



and **Elizabeth Cornelius Wilkerson Shelby (1830–1897)**, along with two of their children, are buried there. **Peter Wilkerson (1782–1859)** is possibly there also.

The Wilkerson family continued to own their plantation land well after 1900, but it was no longer farmable. It was simply an overgrown, abandoned flood plane. It is now owned by a private hunting club.

This photograph, taken by my cousin Princella Wilkerson Nowell, was found in my mother's records. The tombstone marks the grave of Thomas Jefferson (Tommie) Wilkerson (1853–1875), my great-great-uncle, who died at age 22. He is George Washington Wilkerson's older brother. The marker still stands at the site of Black Bayou Plantation.

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4. THE FINAL RESTING PLACES OF GEORGE WASHINGTON WILKERSON AND CATHERINE ADAMS WILKERSON

Catherine Adams Wilkerson (1860–1916) and George Washington Wilkerson (1857–1917) died in the years of 1916 and 1917, respectively. She was 55 years old and he was 59 years old. Apparently they were not living together in their latter years.

Catherine Adams Wilkerson died in Nashville. She is buried in Nashville at the Mount Olivet cemetery plot of Frank N. Boensch, her brother-in-law. We do not know when or why she returned to Nashville. Below is a copy of her interment record at the cemetery. There is no tombstone.

[LOT INTERMENT]

MT. OLIVET CEMETERY

H. W. SPICER, Treasurer

Nashville, Tenn. *March 7 1916*

To Superintendent Mt. Olivet Cemetery:

Open a Grave for the interment of the remains of *Katherine Ann Wilkerson*

On _____ Lot No. _____ Section _____

Owned by _____

Ordered by *James W. Boensch*

Services *7:30* o'clock _____ M. *Mar 3/16*

Size Box *# 3 Box* feet _____ inches _____

Charges \$ *26.00* *Funeral Home Art*

Undertaker *J. W. Spicer*

Permission is hereby given to bury the remains of _____

on the above named lot.

By *H. W. Spicer* Lot Holder Treas.

This document mistakenly says Katherine Ann Wilkerson instead of Catherine Adams Wilkerson.

GEO. W. WILKERSON DEAD

George W. Wilkerson, for many years residing near Lamont, died at the Kings Daughters Hospital here Saturday night at 11 o'clock. Mr. Wilkerson was brought to the hospital Thursday for treatment, and was not considered by relatives and friends as dangerously ill, but he rapidly weakened and died Saturday night.

Mr. Wilkerson was a prominent planter of the Delta for many years. He leaves two sons, Messrs Jeff P. and Harry Wilkerson and two daughters, Mrs. Hugh Hayley, of Memphis, and Mrs. Hugh Foote, of Longwood.

Impressive funeral services were held from the First Presbyterian church at 10:30 this morning and notwithstanding the terrific weather many friends gathered at the funeral services to pay the last sad tribute to their friend.

The interment was at the Greenville cemetery immediately following the funeral services.

Mr. Wilkerson died at the age of 58 years, after an active life and will be missed by his hosts of friends as well as by members of his family.

George Washington Wilkerson died in 1917 at age 59, not age 58, as reported in his obituary. He is buried in the Greenville, Mississippi, cemetery. His tombstone is pictured below.

