

A Century of Memories

A FAMILY REUNION WITH BENJAMIN WHITE'S DESCENDANTS
by Johnnie Patterson Mitchell

August is not only the last full month of summer but it's also family reunion month on Hilton Head Island. It is becoming a tradition for native families on the Island to come together for a day of rejoicing, outside eating and, most importantly, reestablishing family bonds. The White family held its first reunion this past August, and it is quite fitting indeed that we spotlight this



Dea. Benjamin White, Sr.

historical reunion because this family has contributed so much to Hilton Head Island.

Members of the White family gathered August 1 at Mrs. Nellie White's house on Union Cemetery Road. Retracing the path to this event leads to a date 100 years ago when a baby named Benjamin Walter White was born. This baby was destined to become a hardworking man of vision who would leave indelible "footprints on the sands" of Hilton Head Island.

History books written about the Island deal with the period from the landing of William Hilton to the end of the Civil War. Then it jumps to the 50s when the Island is reportedly "rediscovered" by the developers. The years between the Civil War and the developed Hilton Head are usually summarized in a sentence: "the Island was occupied by farmers and fishermen."

Benjamin White, for years the patriarch of the White family, was one



Children of Benjamin White with his widows seated on right. Islanders seated L to R: Benjamin, Jr., Johnny, Rosalie (4th from left). Sandy and Hannah, standing (4th and 5th from left.)

of those farmers. Talking to the old-timers at these family reunions reveals a poignant story of struggle and survival that occurred between the Civil War and the development. Perhaps this look at the White family will aid tremendously in bridging this gap in the history of Hilton Head.

The branches from the roots of Benjamin White today extend far and wide. Attached to the house on family reunion day was a copy of the family tree drawn by Edward "Eddie" Barnwell, Jr. (grandson). The tree shows approximately 110 branches from "Papa," Benjamin White, Sr. A large majority of the descendants were present at the reunion with in-laws, other relatives and friends. The occasion was planned by Rosalie White Barnwell, daughter, a retired school teacher who has played a significant role in the educational system of the Island. Tables were set under the live oaks, and caterers were kept busy. Within walking distance is the cemetery where "Papa" rests in peace, buried on his own property next to his son, Dr. Marion White, who held a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from Tuskegee Institute; his daughter Jannie Mitchell, other family members and Islanders.

Rain began to fall and everyone took cover inside. If a family has to have rain on Family Reunion Day, the White family is probably the only family least affected. Over 250 people fitted into the house with ease. Caterers and guests moved to the basement. The White house is reportedly the only house on the Island with a full basement.

This was "Ben White's" style — go first class or not at all. The day consisted of a program of registration, get-acquainted hour, dinner, disco and social hour. It was a wonderful sight to see four generations meet, greet and recall "Papa."

Benjamin White, born April 6, 1881, was the son of Hannah White, who died shortly after his birth. But before she died, she made provisions for young Benjamin. She asked her relatives, Peter and Clisa Chisolm, to raise her son. The Chisolms took little Benjamin with them to Willie Brown's farm on Cherry Hill Plantation where they were sharecroppers. The three remained on the farm until the death of Peter. Benjamin was 17 years old when Peter died. Benjamin purchased the first 10 acres of the 100-plus acres of land he would eventually acquire. The land was located in Grasslawn where he

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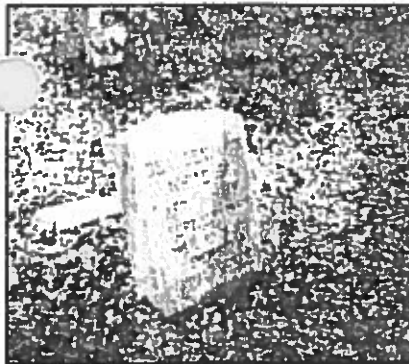
oved his adopted mother from Willie
own's farm to her own house.

Benjamin attended the public school
on the Island and acquired the level of
education that was available at that
time, approximately the third grade.
With the property he acquired, he carved
out a living for himself and his family
as a farmer. He became the largest and
most respected farmer on Hilton Head.

Present at the reunion were children



Andre White



Benjamin White, Sr.

from Benjamin's three marriages. He
first married Grace Gibson of Hilton
Head in 1903. They had four children:
Hanna, Johnny, Jannie and Benjamin,
Jr. When Grace died, Benjamin later
married Queen Elizabeth Singleton.
They had eleven children but only four
survived early childhood. They are
Christine, Joseph, Julia (Pearl) and
James. Queen Elizabeth died and Ben-
jamin later married Nellie Johnson.
Mrs. Nellie J. White is now the oldest
living member of the White family. She
is still a beautiful woman who exudes
strength and character. Benjamin and
Nellie had seven children: Rosalie,
Marion, Charles, Napoleon, Sandy, Ir-
in and David.

All these children have given Ben-
jamin a total of 36 grandchildren.

These grandchildren range in ages
from 51 to 1. There are 33 great-
grandchildren and one great-great-
grandchild, age 4.

This man stepped forward in his
strength and foresightedness. Despite
his lack of formal education, he was a
very intelligent man who had a zest for
education, hard work and progress.
Despite the fact that he had always lived
on this isolated, barrier Island, he
somehow understood the value of
education. Using farming as his
livelihood, he gave every one of his
children the opportunity to continue
their education beyond the offerings of
Hilton Head. They took advantage of
those opportunities to varying degrees.

Four of his children live on Hilton
Head; three are in Savannah and one in
Valdosta, Georgia. The remainder live
in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Trenton
and Englishtown, New Jersey, and Co-
lumbia, Maryland. Seven are teachers
or in the administrative part of educa-
tion with three Ph.D.s among them.
Two are longshoremen, one a nurse,
and one a doctor of veterinary
medicine.

While Mr. White believed in training
the mind, he believed equally in hard
work. These children's schooling was
financed from the watermelons and
other vegetables they raised in what is
now Port Royal Plantation. The
watermelons were loaded onto boats
and taken to the Savannah market. Mr.
White was probably the first man to own
a tractor on the Island. While many peo-
ple on the Island were skeptical of
change, Ben White was a man for prog-
ress. He prophesied that one day
Hilton Head would become the
"Garden of Eden of the South," and he
wanted his descendants to be prepared
to meet the changes. Ben White died on
September 23, 1955, so he did not live
to see the Hilton Head Island we now
know as he had envisioned.

He was a glib speaker and would
seize the opportunity to speak at most
occasions. Wherever Ben White was,
he was heard as well as seen. He was a
man of big physical stature. When he
spoke, people listened, and he played a
significant role in the church and com-
munity life of Hilton Head.

Saint James Baptist Church and Ben
White were synonymous for all of his
adult life. He was on the Deacon Board
and chairman of that church's govern-

ing body for over fifty years. He assumed
a leading role in the services such as
"raising" the hymns and giving a hearty
soul-stirring prayer. If there were
issues in the community, Ben White
would call them to the member's atten-
tion in no uncertain terms. His opinion
always supported action and improve-
ment.

The White Family, not surprisingly,
culminated their family reunion with a
service at St. James Baptist Church, on
Sunday, August 2nd. For the church it
was the fourth annual homecoming ser-
vice. This year it featured the Benjamin
White, Sr. Family. The program was
held at 5:00 p.m. with Tom Barnwell,
Jr. (grandson) serving as Master of
Ceremonies. Other members of the
family presented the solos and Mrs.
Janice Barnwell White (grand-
daughter) read the history of the White
family that was compiled by a commit-
tee chaired by grandson Perry White.

The highlight of the Program was the
speech given by son Napoleon A.
White. Napoleon lives in Philadelphia
and is the son of Ben and Nellie White.
Napoleon, like the other children, was a
product of the Hilton Head public
school. He attended St. Helena High
School where he graduated in the class
of 1950. Later that year he entered S.C.
State College in Orangeburg where he
was awarded a B.S. Degree in Biology
in 1954. He later did graduate work at
Antioch Putney and received a Master
of Education Degree in 1973. In 1974 he
received his principal certificate from
Temple University in Philadelphia.
Napoleon was first employed by the
Board of Education in 1955 and he has
been with the Board ever since. He
served as a science teacher for many
years, acting vice principal and has
served as Dean of Students for the past
six years.

In his speech he quoted his father
"Ben," recalling these words: "A man
should shade the ground he stands on,
and let your word be your bond." He
also recalled a comment made by his
father, "If anybody should ask about
him and his family, tell them, we are ris-
ing!"

The members of the White family are
sure Mr. Ben White's spirit was there
at the reunion and he is proud of his
descendants. The Ben White Family
shade the ground they stand on, cast a
long shadow and they are rising!

To the Greers,
Greetings from
the past, and you
bring such
joy to
the
present
and

*The Spirit of Freedom
Lives in We..*

**The Scrapbook of
a Native Islander**

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by

Johnnie P. Mitchell

the future
will
always
have your
great images
and words
to keep the
Gullahs alive!

Thanks!
Johnnie Mitchell
8/18/03