

# Transcript of OH-00254

William Preston Williams

Interviewed by  
Stevan Charnock

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## Typographic Note

- [Inaudible] is used when a word cannot be understood.
- Brackets are used when the transcriber is not sure about a word or part of a word, to add a note indicating a non-verbal sound and to add clarifying information.
- Em Dash — is used to indicate an interruption or false start.
- Ellipses ... is used to indicate a natural extended pause in speech

## Subjects

United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865  
Confederate States of America  
Spies  
Potomac River  
United States Naval Proving Ground (Indian Head, Md.)  
Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates  
Soldiers, Black

## Tags

Civil War, 1861-1865  
Confederate sympathizers

Confederate spies  
Goose Bay  
Budd Ferry  
Rose Hill  
Blue Dog Hill  
St. Clements Island

## Transcript

Stevan Charnock [S]: This is Stevan E. Charnock interviewing Mr. Preston Williams in the Southern Maryland Room on March 20th, 1978 at 10 o'clock on his knowledge of the Civil War.

[Tape Interruption]

S: Good morning Mr. Williams. I understand you have new information on the Civil War.

William Preston Williams [P]: Steve good morning. Maryland as you know was a buffer state between the north and the south. It didn't secede like Virginia did and the states all below here. It was very much divided as far as sympathy was concerned. A good many people in this section—most of the people in fact sympathized with the southern, southerners. The northern part of Maryland of course went with the northern, with the United States Army and so forth. So in this section there was quite an upheaval. In fact brothers were fighting against brothers really. The few little stories that I have to tell you have never been recorded before and they pertain to fighting back and forth across the Potomac River. Of the Confederate soldiers around the Virginian side and the northern troops were on the Maryland side and the bulwarks thrown up now on Goose Bay farm and which is now known as Aunt Mary's farm and also Budd's Ferry farm.

Budd's Ferry belonged to my grandfather Peter Williams. And he sold a lot of produce, both vegetable and meats and things, of that kind to the Confederate Army. And they carried it across the river. And when we had some very heavy very bad winters they would take it across on the ice in a horse cart. Not with the horse of course. They wanted to take the horse but my grandfather would never let them take the horse because he said the horses—the horse so put so much weight on one foot sometimes that it might break through. And he didn't want to lose his horse that way. So however the soldiers did come across. The confederate soldiers came across and bargained for this. And there was a—I'm not so sure whether of his rank or not but I think he was a colonel. There was a Colonel Preston that my father dealt with—my grandfather dealt with a good deal selling him various vegetables and fruits and whatever he had raised in this country. Even fish was sold and carried across the river and lots of meat.

My father tells the story of how one time two soldiers brought the horse cart. They'd take it over in a horse cart and then bring the horse cart back on the ice. And they came back one time and

they, the ice started running, started cracking up and these men wanted to get back to their troops in Virginia. Two men and they insisted on crossing the river. My grandfather, Peter Williams, begged them not to do it because he said it's very dangerous; however, they insisted they had to get back. He cut them long pine poles and each one took a pole and strapped it to himself and started across the river. As far as he could see—you can't see a man all the way across the river. It's just impossible to see them that far. But as far as he could see they were still up jumping from block to block of ice.

S: Okay what role did Goose Bay farm and Budd's Ferry farm play in the Civil War?

P: They—the federal soldiers were bivouacked on this side and on Budd's Ferry and Goose Bay and also another farm which is now known as Sailor's Retreat. On Chicamuxen Creek it is. The federal soldiers were bivouacked down in there and the confederates were on the other side. Also the Posey property, Posey Farm, which has been sold recently, was a part of the right in the line too.

The story goes and this is true they would put a man on a white horse with a black coat. The man with a black coat would ride up or down the shore showing the confederate soldiers on the other side which way the federal troops were camped. Where they were camped. One time they were so accurate that the second shot they shot across they cut the flag pole down in the camp on this side. On the Maryland side. So then Mr. Posey was, Colonel Posey, they called him Colonel Posey at that time. He was a well-educated man. I'm not sure which one of the colleges he went to but it was he was an engineer, civil engineer. And the Posey property to this day is all—you can trace the gutters of the drainage all over that farm. It's quite remarkable. It really is. He being an engineer he wanted to see how this was you know laid it out just perfectly. He also laid his fields out very systematically so he'd have for instance 20 acres in one field and 10 in another and five in another and so forth. It was said of old Colonel Posey that if they had—he lived in a lavish way at that time. This white horse that he had was a purebred Arabian stallion and his name was Comet. Somebody would ride up or down the shore showing them as I said a minute ago I'm repeating now, showing which way the federal soldiers were on this side.

Now a man that I knew, Mr. William [Winter Coby], at one time happened up there when they wanted to show which way the troops were moving on this side and they wanted to show which way the troops were going and they pressed him in service. It seems that there was not a man available and this boy was only about 15 years old. And they pressed him in service to ride his horse. So they put him in a black coat with a black hat and this white horse which stood out all the way across the river, which is about a mile and a half wide there. So he said he was—he felt very, very well not exactly guilty because he was naturally a southern sympathizer but he was frightened. He was afraid that the soldiers on this side would find out what he was doing and of course they were spies. And eventually they caught up with this old Colonel Posey and locked he and his wife up. Took them to Washington and locked them up in jail and kept them several

months up there. All the winter. And old Mrs. Posey never knew anything but "Damn Yankee" was one word.

S: What role—first of all what is a bivouac?

P: It's a camping ground. In other words they'd camp there overnight. You see maybe they'd camped there for quite a while. In fact they selected that very nicely being military people you know. They—it was down behind the hill on what is now known as Reed Run and Reed Run Swamp and it's the main tributary of the Chicamuxen Creek. It really feeds Chicamuxen Creek. Reed Run makes up at Doncaster. And that is Doncaster is a dividing line and one of the highest places in Charles County. That is as far as altitude is concerned. There at one place on my father's farm water that fell on one side of the of a roof of a particular building went to Nanjemoy Creek and if it fell on the other side. Two raindrops would fall down and the one fell on one side would go to Nanjemoy Creek and the one fell on the other side would go to Chicamuxen Creek. And when they hit the Potomac River they were about 20 miles apart.

S: Okay what was the military force like during the Civil War?

P: Well, General Hooker was the man that had command of the troops over here and there was also a camping ground on a place named Littleton. Littleton is back from the water and back from the Potomac River about a mile I would say. That was a camping ground and as a boy it was a great pleasure for me to go over there particularly after they had been working crops turning the soil up to wade through those fields and pick up mini balls and little lead balls and also quite a few arrows, Indian arrows we found in there. Seems as if there was a good spring there and the Indians used it before the federal soldiers came in. Of course they took it because of the water, the water supply.

S: What were the mini balls?

P: It was—maybe I didn't describe that right—it what I was thinking of was something about as big as your thumb. A lead ball and it would really stop you because it was sort of a blunt thing and about as big as your thumb and about an inch long as I remember. I haven't seen one for years. And it was a hand, hand gun.

S: It was used—so it was used in a gun?

P: And used in battles.

S: Was it used in rifles or just in a hand gun?

P: I think they were used in hand guns but I'm not positive of that. I wouldn't be sure of that. I wouldn't want to be quoted on that. But anyway they shot them back and forth.

S: Okay can you remember what the roads were like during the Civil War?

P: Pardon I didn't get—

S: The roads they used—

P: Oh yes indeed. In fact there was what we called a corduroy road. It ran from Glymont to Riverside. And what a corduroy road was was in the bad places they'd put down poles. Usually cedar. Cedar or oak because they'd stay there a long time. And in my lifetime I remember seeing those old roads and you'd bump over them as you drove you know because the cedar would stay there for years and years and you could see the stubs of them. And it was a road that ran by Smallwood Retreat. That road ran by Smallwood Retreat. Of course they didn't put these in everywhere but they put them in marshy places. Where you had to cross in mud and stuff like that. I remember seeing them very well. Seeing the butts of them sticking out. Of course they by that time when I came along the road was abandoned. Not abandoned but worn through. All of the poles had worn through from the wagons and carts hauling wood and so forth and railroad ties which were very plentiful down in this part of the country. They wore them out but you could see the ends of them sticking out on the where the wagons didn't hit them on both sides of the road.

S: Do you know if there's any roads like this left around?

P: I don't think so because I only remember that as a child. I would like to go where I last saw them sometime, which is near Chicamuxen Creek. It's between Chicamuxen Creek and Mattawoman Creek. Also they had a telegraph line that ran down there and the line ran. I don't know where it started but it ran down what is now known as Route 6. And for years there was several cleats on trees. Where they put the cleats on the trees. When 6 was improved when they made it a state road they cut those trees down to widen the road and of course they were lost. Looking back on it now I wish I had gone out there and saved a couple of them. I'd like to have them.

S: Saved a cleat?

P: A cleat uh-huh. Cleat that—it looked very much like a cleat you've seen the I'm sure where on a telephone pole or something like that. It was wood. I think it was made of locust, locust wood so that's why it stayed there so long.

S: Okay do you know what role Charles County played in the Civil War?

P: As I say Charles County was largely sympathetic with the south. One place right here close by in Port Tobacco Valley—and I'm sure this has been written up in history quite a bit—is Rose Hill. And now that belonged to a lady named Mrs. Olivia Floyd at that time. I think I'm correct on that. Mrs. Floyd was really a spy. They suspected her as a spy and it is said that she had a

tunnel running from her house down into Port Tobacco where she could hide and take soldiers. The soldiers could go underground. I don't know how authentic that is. It's just hearsay. I never knew or never saw it. But I do know this to happen that the federal officers suspected her as a spy and she had some very important papers and she found out they were coming and she hid them in the andirons. Atop of the andirons in the fireplace. And these people came in—these officers came in and warmed their feet by the fire and were asking her a lot of questions and little did they know that that important information was within a few feet of there right where they were.

S: She was a—was she a—Mrs. Floyd was she a southern spy or a northern spy?

P: Oh, oh southern, southern yeah. I think her boyfriend was killed in the war and I think that made her very bitter. Now that is conjecture too. I'm not quite sure that I'm right on that.

S: Did the north by any chance ask her to come over to their side and spy for them?

P: The north what now?

S: Did the north in the Civil War ask Mrs. Floyd to come over to their side and spy for them?

P: Well I don't think so. No they knew that she was dyed in the wool and so they didn't. What they were trying to do was get some evidence on her but they couldn't find anything. She was too shrewd for them. And that is Rose hill which is sometimes known as Blue Dog Hill. The way it got its name Blue Dog Hill was it's supposed to have been a blue dog that came out there at a certain time at night. You had to go there at midnight and go all alone and quite a few traditions about it. And this blue dog would lead you to the pot of gold where the owners of the property way back before the Civil War hid their, hid their money. If you went there unarmed and oh there were a lot of things about it. You had to be unarmed and you had to be alone and it had to be a dark night and then this blue dog would appear and you'd follow that dog and you—of course there's the truth of it was nobody ever had nerve to go in there that time of night.

S: So nobody?

P: So nobody ever found it. Incidentally my father in-law was an editor of the *Times, Port Tobacco Times* at one time and he wrote a poem about that. It's somewhere recorded and probably they have it here at the college somewhere. Something about Blue Dog Hill.

S: Okay do you know of any changes that might have occurred since the Civil War?

P: Since the Civil War? Well it would be, anything would be more or less modern. The whole country down there changed. The Stump Neck—and let me go into that a little bit more thoroughly. Stump Neck was inline, firing line of the shells from Indian Head the Naval Proving Ground. I've forgotten the name of the people that owned it at one time but this old lady lived in

the house and they fired through there and struck. A ball struck on her porch. So she was right in the line of fire and the range became smaller as the guns got bigger and the ships got bigger you know. They were testing ships for—testing guns for the ships and battleships. And as they got bigger and they put more power behind them, more powder—they were testing both the powder the shell, the armor plate on the ships and all that was done at Indian Head, which started somewhere in the nineteenth century. It was the end of the—end of the nineteenth century. I'm not sure of the exact date. But they got—they'd fire guns down and as a child it was a great—to fire the shells down the river. And as a child it was a great pleasure for me to go up to my uncle's farm and stand up there on the hill and watch these shells hitting the water. There must be hundreds of them down in there now. Of course the water would go up a hundred feet in the air you know. They're not bursting shells but they finally. The river turned and the rains went on toward Quantico and they finally started shooting into Quantico, which is now the marine base. In those days it was just a town and it wasn't known as Quantico. It was known as Potomac...Potomac...Potomac City I believe it was. Potomac City. And I know this to be a fact that they shot over there one time and shot very near a cow. A beautiful jersey cow and the lady that owned the cow said that the cow never gave any milk from then on. So the government bought the cow. When I worked at Indian Head this cow was a pet. They had it grazing around all around the proving ground up there. Never gave anymore milk.

S: Okay. Do you know what type of religious life they might have had around the Civil War? Religious life. Do you know what type of religious life they had around the Civil War?

P: Bivouac?

S: Religious life around the Civil War.

P: Religious life well of course this section was settled by the Catholic order because of they were primarily the ones that came over in the Ark and Dove. Father White had the first mass on St. Clements Island, which is later known as Blackistone Island because the Blackistone's purchased it. Blackistone: B-L-A-C-K-I-S-T-O-N-E. That's the way it's spelled not just black stone. Blackistone. When you come up the river it really looks like the island sits in the center of the river. It doesn't it sits over on the Maryland side a lot but there's a section in there that's a very little channel. It's known as Kettle Bottom Shoals. Kettle Bottom Shoals has really no channel. It's up some places and down in others and it's about five miles through there. Three to five miles anyway. It would be terribly expensive to cut a channel through there which probably wouldn't stay if you cut it. It would just fill up again. But that is true and in 19—I'm not sure about my dates you'd better not quote that but—there was a cross erected in honor of Father White on Blackistone's Island. I remember going to it and I was a young man and my father at that time said, "You should go to see this because it's a historical event." And later on the United States government moved their proving ground from Indian Head to Dahlgren. And when they went to Dahlgren, which is on Virginia's side, they had much



longer range. But Blackistone's Island was right in the line of fire again so they purchased Blackistone Island or St. Clements Island it might be called more correctly. That's where the cross was erected. And then I worked at Dahlgren for a year or more and was working right in this kind of work and we fired shells right over St. Clements Island and a fragment or nothing had never been known to hit that cross. It stands about a hundred feet high I would say.

S: Was there by any chance any member of your family involved in the Civil War?

P: Not directly. Of course they were back but I don't know who they were. I don't remember any of my uncles were old enough to have joined and certainly my father wasn't. Most of—he was one of the youngest ones in that family and my mother was the youngest one in my mother's family. So some of their older brothers and sisters I think had something to do with it but I don't think that any of my real close relatives did. I want to tell you a little story about a man that I ran across up in Front Royal, Virginia because it ties in with St. Mary's County and the prison camp there. Colonel Compton was a colonel in the Confederate Army. Very fine looking old gentleman. Tall and very erect and white hair as I knew him. I used to love to visit Front Royal. My wife went to school with his granddaughter and that's how I happened to get in contact with him. I could sit up there for an hour and listen to him tell these stories.

This is one that he told that I think it might be interesting and that was that he was captured up at Harper's Ferry. There was a prison camp at...is it Point Lookout? Yeah Point Lookout in St. Mary's County. The prison camp was there. They were placed in a freight car. A good many prisoners and were being shipped to down to St. Mary's County. I don't know whether there's a railroad all the way down there or not, but anyway they brought him in as far as Washington and probably went from there by boat from there down. While he was on the in that freight car they found an axe and they cut a hole in the floor of the freight cars the car was running along. Nobody could hear them cutting because of the train was making so much noise. They cut a hole in there and decided they would all crawl through the hole the first time the train stopped. So the train did stop and they crawled out and they happened to be right across the Potomac River at Harper's Ferry. Right where the Shenandoah River and the Potomac River come together. The Shenandoah empties into the Potomac. So anyway they went on out hoping that the train would pull on over and they'd lay there until the train pulled out and then they'd walk ashore. But of course when they did they were—the soldiers were watching that very closely and they picked them up again and put them in another car and then had a guard in there with them. The guard watched them anyway more closely.

They finally got down to Point Lookout. Then he told me about being down there. He soon after he got there he found a—well his buddy. He had a buddy with him and his buddy found a black man that was raised on this buddy's farm down in Alabama. And so right away this boy—the black man was guarding him as a matter of fact. This, this confederate soldier who was a prisoner at that time said, "Well John imagine seeing you here." He said, "My golly." And the

boy was a little, the black boy didn't warm up to him very much at first. He looked at him and he said, well he said, "The bottom rail's certainly riding the top one now isn't it?" So then he thought maybe he was gonna be belligerent but as it turned out this boy turned on his charm and he talked to this black boy about how they used to go swimming together and all like that on the farm down there and the boy was a great benefactor. He had entre to the kitchen, the galley and he brought them little nice things like pies and cookies and things like that that the ordinary soldiers wouldn't ordinarily—prisoners of course—wouldn't get. They were just made for the officers and their own soldiers to some extent too. So it turned out that this boy was a great help to them and he also had mail. All mail was censored and he had the mail sent to him and then he brought it into these boys.

S: What role did the black person play?

P: [Did what]?

S: What role—what role did the black person play in the Civil War?

P: Some of—good many of the blacks went over to the federal side and joined the United States Army. Then they lived here afterwards. Came back and of course they got pensions. The ones that didn't go, that is the white ones, white boys, got no pension at all because they lost. In other words their side lost. But the black soldiers that went from here received pensions all their lives. I remember my father ran a country store and a good many of these pension checks would come there to Doncaster Post Office and he would cash them. That was cash money because money was hard to come by in those days. Very hard to come by. They would spend rather freely. They'd buy groceries and their clothing and things of that kind.

S: Well right now I haven't got any more questions to ask of you.

P: That's alright.

S: But if you have say any more information to give?

P: I haven't really anything else that more or less have to be suggested like asking questions that I could maybe answer and things of that kind but I really don't have anything else right at the moment to think of. I—oh I did want to tell you this. Some people named Budd lived at Budd's Ferry. B-U-double D. And she was my great-great-aunt. Aunt Macy [Artemisia] was her name. [Artemisia] Budd. B-U-double D. Aunt Macy Budd owned Budd's Ferry and of course that's where I told you about them taking the groceries and so forth over to the southern army on that side. They were firing—she was in the line of fire and they fired a ball through her house from the Virginia side. In other words, the confederate's were. She was a confederate sympathizer but they were firing over here and they fired through her house. So then she decided that she'd have to move. I think her husband had died before and she was living there. Maybe alone I don't

know. Probably with her slaves and so forth that she had at that time. So she moved up to a place near Doncaster called Frog's Nest, which is now owned by the—it's a Maryland State Forest. Doncaster State Forest. And I visited her grave just the last—within the last couple of weeks. She was buried up there on Frog's Nest and it has a very nice little epitaph on her—engraved on her gravestone saying that nobody ever passed her house without receiving a kindness and so forth. Quite a little writing on it. And then she also—she lived up there all her life and was buried on the place where her husband was buried up there. So evidently he died and then she died. And it says that the stone was erected by her nieces and nephews that loved her so or something like that. There's quite a little bit written on it.

S: Okay Mr. Williams I want to thank you for taking your time and coming up here and sharing your knowledge of the Civil War.

P: It's a pleasure. Well I—I don't have a great deal of knowledge but sometimes and I don't think it's probably interesting to other people but on the other hand it could be. Some little phases of it could be. I don't want to say that my little dissertation here is authentic because it's as I heard it and that's the only way I can go. I don't know just how I can't prove many of these things. It's just a hearsay given from down from one generation to another. Those things however do not get in the history and it's only the probably the more important things that get in and these little stories that are just sort of a side thing. But it's very interesting to come over here and talk with you Steve.

S: Okay. Thank you sir.