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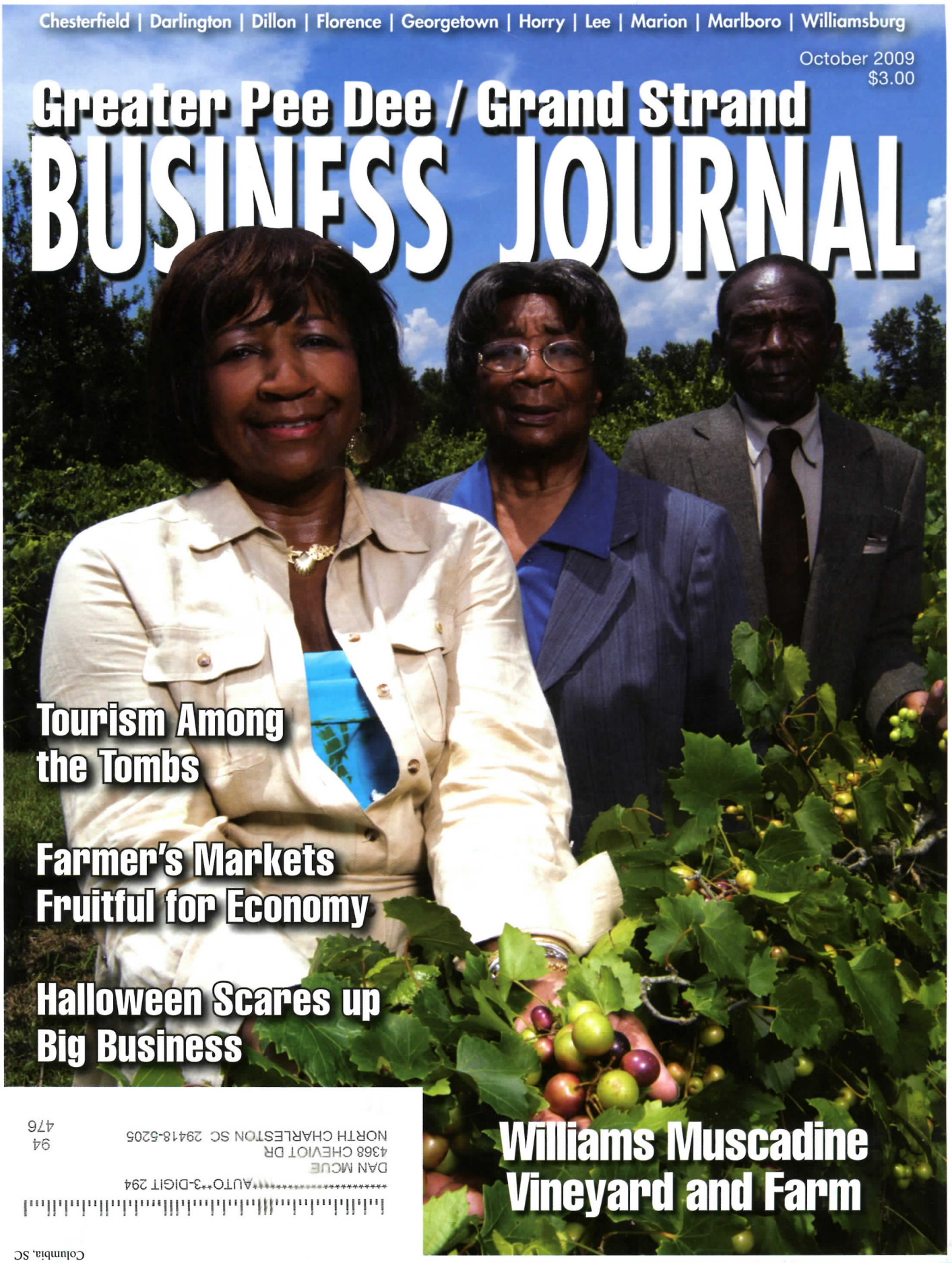

Tourism Among the Tombs

Farmer's Markets Fruitful for Economy

Halloween Scares up Big Business

Williams Muscadine Vineyard and Farm

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Williams Muscadine Vineyard and Farm

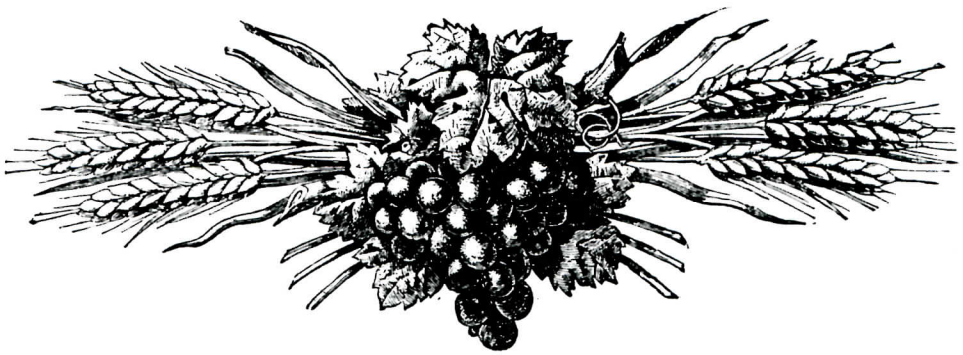
BY DAN MCCUE
PHOTOS BY T.S. DONANHUE

Tremayne Williams, Annie Gymph Williams, Latoya Williams Parker
(F to B)

Credit: Kate Phillips

Tayla Morgan Parker, Mark Aaron Parker, Elneicia Williams Stuckey, Cassandra Williams Rush, Waldo Wendall Williams, Rosa Edith McClary Williams, David Austin Williams (F to B)

Williams Muscadine Vineyard was derived from the Williams Farm, which was established in Nesmith, South Carolina during the early 1930s by Rev. Gabriel Williams, and Mary Pressley Nesmith Williams, after their marriage on April 10, 1926. They were the first generation of their family born out of slavery.



They told David Williams he couldn't grow grapes successfully in Williamsburg County. The soil just isn't right, an extension agent said. Conventional wisdom suggested he find something else — almost anything else — to grow instead.

But then, Williams said with a sparkle in his eye, he never was much for conventional wisdom.

Standing on the edge of four-and-a-half acres of grape vines, all hanging heavy with ripening Muscadine grapes, the 82 year old chuckled at the memory.

"After that visit to the local extension office, I was kind of on my own," he said, a baseball cap shading his face from a bright afternoon sun. "Of course, if you want to learn something bad enough, you manage."

A lean man of average height, Williams emanated strength and calm as he moved among his vines and the bounty ripening underneath their large spade-like leaves. A friendly man — he welcomed guests by slicing two freshly picked watermelons, entreating them to enjoy a fruit that had yet to be put on ice — in his element, in the field, he adopts a posture of quiet attentiveness.

"Anything you want to be good at, you have got to pay attention to everyday," Williams said, as his eye scanned the vineyard. His conversation was punctuated by silences, time he seemed to purposely build into his socializing to give him time to consider a turn of leaf, the cascade of a series of vines, or even a lilt or animal call emanating from the nearby woods.

"It's not a toy; it's a job. And you have to be committed," he said. "You don't do something like this because someone else is doing it."

Since retiring from his career as a teacher more than a decade ago, Williams has almost singlehandedly turned a plot of land that's been in his family for over a century into a thriving, low-overhead enterprise that brings in under $20,000 a year.

At a time when big corporate farms have cornered most of the agricultural market, Williams is a vestige of a time when farming was an almost single-minded pursuit and a long, hard day's work.

For six years now, his efforts have culminated each Labor Day weekend with the Muscadine Grape Festival and the month-long U-pick that follows during which scores of visitors make their way up the gravel road named for his Dad and park out in front of the family's Nesmith home.

A gathering place

According to family historian Cassandra Williams-Rush, whose day job is serving as HBCU-UP project manager at Allen University in Columbia, no one quite knows when the family hosted its first gathering on the land. As she explained, surviving property ownership records for African-Americans dating back to the 19th century are scant at best.

What's certain, however, is that the farm has been a popular gathering spot for neighbors and others since at least the 1930s, when the Rev. Gabriel Williams and his wife Mary Pressley Nesmith Williams built their still-existing, gray-paneled farm house on the land.

From the start the couple shared an uncommon synchronicity.

Both were born in 1882, both were members of the first generation of the family to be born outside of slavery, and both, by the time they met, had been widowed.

Another thing they had in common was they were each the heads of large single-parent families. At the time of their marriage on April 10, 1926, he had 12 children, while she had 10; David Williams was the only child they had together.

While perhaps none of those attributes were uncommon at the time, something else the Williams' shared was — both were quite literate.

Thanks to their literacy, the home quickly became a gathering place in the community.

"People were always coming over to have their mail and other documents read to them," said Williams Rush. "Later, when the home was among the first to have electricity, it became even more of a gathering place."

According to Williams Rush, while tending what was originally known as Nesmith Farm was always an integral part of Williams family life, her grandparents wanted something else for their youngest son.

With their loving guidance and insistence, he attended the Brown primary school, and planned to attend Tomlinson High School in Kingstree until a school administrator insisted he start a year behind his proper class because of differences in the Brown and Tomlinson curriculum.

Instead, the Rev. Williams enrolled his son in Morris College in Sumter to finish the 11th grade — the highest grade in secondary school at the time. From there, Williams made the jump to South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, where he earned a bachelor's degree in vocational agriculture.

Degree in hand, he returned home to teach at the Brown and Battery Park schools, as well as to raise a family of his own.

In the intervening years, the age of the independent farmer largely disappeared, having been eclipsed by the big commercial farms that dominate agriculture today.

"People from the federal government tried to encourage local farmers to get into an alternative cash crop and even tried to provide some direction," Williams said. "But nothing really grabbed me, so I just watched and listened and waited."

A chance meeting, a farm revived

In fact, it wasn't until he retired from teaching that the farm again began to demand his attention. It wasn't that he'd had no interest in farming all those years. In fact, he always grew something on the land. But in terms of anything bigger, he wasn't in any rush, he said. He just didn't know what he wanted to grow.

Then a chance encounter with a friend set his course anew.

"I was out with the truck and ran into this fellow and he told me he was growing grapes in the Upstate," Williams recalled. "We talked a little longer, and then I asked if I could get some plants from him."

In fact, Williams asked for 55 grape vines, but he neglected to ask two other key things: How to grow them, and how much his friend would charge him for the plants.

"I was just thinking of these vines as something to do in my retirement," Williams said. "Imagine my surprise when he charged me $400 to bring them home."

As Williams spoke, his facial expressions seemed to take on the drama of the moment he described. When he got to this point in his tale, he shared the look of a very worried man.

"If I had gone home and told my wife, Edith, I just paid $400 for the plants in the back of the truck, she would have walked right out on me," he said. "I had no experience in growing grapes. I might have thrown that money away."

His eyebrows arching and a smile returning to his face, he added, "Of course I didn't tell her until I'd picked my first crop and started selling our grapes at the local farmer's market."

The sweet flavor of success

Muscadines have been cultivated in some parts of the Southeast since the 16th century, and are generally known to thrive in a hot and humid climate. The berries range from bronze to black when ripe, and the fruit is generally sweeter that the standard grape one might find in the supermarket.

Although predominately eaten fresh or used in jams and jellies, muscadines have also frequently been made into wine, a practice that dates back to the early settlement of St. Augustine, Florida.

Often characterized as a dessert wine because of its sweetness, a growing number of vintners in North Carolina are also making a dry red table wine from the grape. This production is being driven in part by the recent discovery that wine made from muscadine grapes appears to provide greater amounts of antioxidants than many better-known red wines.

In fact, North Carolina, Georgia and even Arkansas have been particularly aggressive in trying to turn it into a cash crop for their respective states.

In North Carolina alone, 127 growers now grow 1,176 acres of muscadines and the state Muscadine Growers' Association in partnership with the North Carolina Wine and Grape Growers' Council has come up with an extensive strategy for fostering and promoting the industry.

Here in South Carolina, the SC Muscadine Initiative has been operating a one-acre demonstration vineyard at the Pee Dee Research and Education Center near Florence for several years now.

It also played a key role in the formation of the Carolina Agri-Solutions Growers Association, a cooperative that hopes to capitalize on growing interest in health issues with products such as nutraceuticals from muscadines and other crops already grown in South Carolina.

Muscadines contain high amounts of phytochemicals such as resveratrol, which helps prevent stroke and heart disease.

In fact, so promising are muscadines health benefits that the Department of Defense is looking at using muscadine-based supplements to enhance war fighter performance.

Although he doesn't make wine for sale himself, Williams said he knows many repeat visitors to the vineyard who pick bushels of grapes just for that purpose. As for their reputed health benefits, Williams said that's the least of what people don't know about the plants he's clearly grown to love.

"The thing that most people don't realize about grape vines is that those that produce fruit aren't grown from seed; they're hybrids," Williams said. "The best vines are always grafted from other fruit-blended vines."

Although his wife, their seven children, spouses, grandchildren and great grand children are all actively involved in the vineyard, all concede it's Williams who made the grape enterprise what it is today.

By his own reckoning, he's out in the vineyard working shortly after sun-up, and even in his early 80s continues to work in field, "until the sun tells me to stop."

He admits to constantly fusing over the vines, and says they keep him busy all year round.

"For instance, every November, long after the last grape has been picked for the year, I'm out here cutting everything off," Williams said.

Caressing a bunch of Muscadines with the palm of his hand, Williams explained that each shoot that produces a bunch of grapes only does so once.

"So you have to cut away the old growth, otherwise your new shoots will be crowded out and next year's harvest will be a disaster," he said, adding as he considered this year's vines, "You know, a lot of people don't know the difference between cutting and pruning."

With that, he was off in instruction mode, explaining how he waits for autumn's first frost to knock the leaves off the vines then spends about a month each year between Halloween and Thanksgiving, simply cutting back the spent woody vines.

Then, for an additional two weeks, he prunes what's left, essentially fine tuning the vines to assure that the shoots that come out the following spring won't get in each other's way.

"I can do the whole thing, by myself, easy in about five, six week's time," he said.

"Paying close attention, that's the first thing," he continued. "If I see a vine looking half-sleepy, I figure out what's made them that way and then I figure out how to wake it up, even if I have to pull a few roots up to find the cause."

To illustrate, Williams recalled returning home from an out-of-state funeral to find several of his plants in a state of very evident stress.

"To tell you the truth, the moment I saw them, I thought I might lose them all," he said.

But upon close inspection, he noticed the ailing vines all had one thing in common, a swelling at their base, only about an inch above the soil line.

Feeling he had to act quickly, Williams retrieved a screwdriver from his nearby workbench and plunged its tip into the bulge.

From the hole came a gelatin-like substance. Williams, who is so devoted to natural farming methods that he never bothered to install irrigation sprinklers in his fields, cleaned out the mystery substance.

He then repeated the process, jabbing and cleaning the affected plants.

"Basically, it appeared what had happened was that a common garden pest had planted its eggs near the base of the plant, and as they grew, they cut off the water supply to the rest of the vine," Williams said.

As a concession to nature, Williams now breaks from his organic approach to farming in only one respect — each spring, just as the vines are about to burst forth with new growth, he rubs them down with an over the counter pesticide.

"It seems to work out just fine,' he said.

The festival and month long U-pick that follows started at his children's suggestion six years ago, in large part to relieve him of the burden of hauling bushels of grapes to local markets, said Williams Rush.

"He was 76 and still loading the truck largely singlehandedly, and we thought, if we could at least have people, it would save him some of that work," she said.

In 2004, the first year of the festival, about 150 people took the Williams's up on their roadside solicitations to come pick grapes on their property, and the event has been growing more popular ever since. Last year, about three times as many visitors ventured out into the fields, many returning two or three times before the harvest was done.

The family charges $1.50 a pound for grapes picked by visitors; and $2.00 for grapes picked on their behalf by a member of the family.

But the annual event has grown to be about far more than grapes by the bushel. Today, it includes farm tours and educational presentations to groups of school children, and hands on experiences with old farm tools and kitchen utensils. Williams has even gone so far as to build an animal display populated by ducks, Guinea hens and other game and fowl; and this year he's adding a turtle pond.

"The one thing you want is to stimulate the young mind, in any way you can," he said.

In recognition of this dedication, the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission honored the vineyard with the 2009 Preserving Our Places in History Award.

Williams-Rush, who manages the vineyard's Web site and other public relations activities, and serves as the family's historian, described the honor as a "thrill."

"I mean, five generations have walked these same grounds," she said.

As for the family patriarch, he tends to dwell on the honors he receives in the field.

"I remember one year we had an 88-year-old gentleman who just stood at the edge of the vineyard and shook his head, looking like he'd had the thrill of his life," Williams recalled. "He said, 'In all my years I have never seen anything like this.' It doesn't get better than that."