

## **William "April" Ellison: A Black Entrepreneur and Slave Owner in Sumter, S.C. (1790-1861)**

April Ellison, born in 1790 to black slave parents, was owned by William Ellison, a white slave owner. Often children of slaves were named for the month in which they were born. Around 1802 Ellison apprenticed April to William McCreight, a cotton gin and grist mill maker in Winnsboro, South Carolina, to be trained as a cotton gin builder and repairer for planters in the region. Very little is known about April's life beyond his apprenticeship, except in 1811, he had a daughter by Matilda, a sixteen year old slave woman.<sup>1</sup>

April worked in McCreight's gin shop until 1816 learning how to be a blacksmith, a machinist, and a carpenter, skills required of a gin maker. In addition to learning to be a master gin builder during his apprenticeship with McCreight, April learned to read, write, cipher, and do bookkeeping. Indeed, McCreight had provided April with all the skills, both intellectual and mechanical, necessary for independent success as a gin maker.<sup>2</sup> April's long term apprenticeship in gin making prepared him for freedom. Not only did he become a master gin builder, but also he learned how to get along with the white planters. If April aspired to be successful as a free black gin maker, he had to understand the ways of whites.

On June 8, 1816, William Ellison appeared before a Fairfield District magistrate, with five local freeholders, to gain permission to free April, now 26 years of age. In 1817, April moved to Stateburg, Sumter County, South Carolina and started making and repairing cotton gins. April Ellison, as a free person of color and entrepreneur, set up his own successful gin shop in Stateburg.

By the time William was in his late twenties, he was in business for himself as a master cotton gin builder and repairer. Ellison became a successful businessman and mechanic. A [bill to Judge Thomas Waites dated October 6, 1817](#) exemplified that Ellison was truly skilled at his work. Ellison completely disassembled, rebuilt, and reassembled Waite's cotton gin. It probably took him twelve days to complete this job. By 1819, Ellison had bought two male slaves to work in his shop. In 1820, April legally changed his name to William Ellison, Jr., the name of his former owner. [The 1820 Federal Census for Sumter, S.C.](#) indicates that Ellison owned two adult male slaves and he and his wife had three sons and a daughter.

On [February 16, 1838, the Columbia Southern Times & State Gazette](#) was announcing that "William Ellison, a free person of color, Statesburg," was one of the persons authorized to make and sell the improved Cotton Saw Gin and Reversed Grist Mill patented by William McCreight & Son of Winnsboro.

As a result of the high price and increased production of cotton, by 1840 William had twelve slaves working in his shop. The nine members of the Ellison family were enumerated in the [1840 Federal Census for Sumter, S.C., as Free Colored Persons](#). On December 13, 1848, Ellison placed an [advertisement in the Sumter Banner](#), a newspaper, advertising his business

of making and repairing gins.

The [1850 U.S. Census for Sumter District, S.C.](#) indicates that the Ellison family, now numbering ten adults and children, owned real estate valued at \$6,000. According to the [1850 U.S. Census Slave Schedule of Sumter District, S.C.](#), William Ellison was listed as the owner of thirty-seven slaves, twenty-seven males and ten females. His son Henry owned two young slaves, and sons William Jr. and Rubin each had a teenage female slave.

Ellison supported states' rights and the expansion of slavery into the Kansas territory. The [Charleston Mercury reported on June 5, 1856](#), that "William Ellison, a colored man himself, is a large slaveholder, and is much respected throughout the District for his integrity and general good character, was a liberal contributor" to the Kansas Association of Sumter District. This prompted "some spirited remarks from Col. J. D. Blanding, who urged citizens not to be laggard after such an example."

In [a letter to his son Henry, dated March 26, 1857](#), Ellison wrote giving him instructions on managing several of the gin shop customer accounts. It appears that business was going so well and that William's son help was needed to keep up with the accounting.

By 1860 William owned, not only his gin shop, but also a 900-acre cotton plantation. According to the [1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedule of Sumter, S.C.](#), Ellison owned 63 slaves who resided in ten slave houses and his three sons owned nine slaves. William Ellison was the largest of 171 black slaveholders in South Carolina. The [1860 U.S. Census for Statesburgh, S.C.](#), indicates that William and his three sons were all gin makers, and their combined value of personal estate was \$58,000 plus William had real estate valued at \$8,250. His home in Stateburg, which had previously belonged to former governor, Stephen Miller, still stands today. In the entire state, only five percent of the people owned as much land as William. It was unusual, but not impossible, for former slaves to own slaves.

When war broke out in 1861, William became a very devout supporter of the Confederacy. William turned his plantation over from being a cotton cash crop to farming foodstuff for the Confederacy when his grandson joined a Confederate Artillery Unit. After Ellison's death on December 5, 1861, per his wishes, his family actively supported the Confederacy throughout the war. The Ellison family produced foodstuff for the Confederate Army, contributed large amounts of money, paid \$5000 in taxes, and invested a good portion of their fortune into Confederate Bonds, worthless at the end of the war. In 1866, the Ellison family paid [\\$55.77 in annual taxes on income, a watch, a pianoforte, and manufacturers](#). In the [1870 Federal Census for Stateburg, Sumter County, S.C.](#) sons William and Henry Ellison are listed as general merchants with property and real estate valued at \$7,560. In the [1880 Federal Census for Stateburg, Sumter County, S.C.](#), the brothers continue to appear as merchants and there are now five children in the family. Grandson William, age 33, was married to a 26-year-old white Irish woman named Kate, and they had two children. Son William, age 80, appears in the [1900 Federal Census for Stateburg, Sumter County, S.C.](#), as a farmer and his sister-in-law, Amelia, Henry's widow, is listed as a land owner.

Undoubtedly, the greatest accomplishment of William Ellison was his transitioning from a slave to an entrepreneur. With his technological and business skills, William was able to earn his freedom and become a successful entrepreneur. From reading his papers at the Caroliniana

Library in the University of South Carolina, reviewing Census reports, other primary sources, and secondary sources the life and times of William Ellison and his family is revealed.

[Ellison Family Graveyard, Stateburg, Sumter County, S.C.](#)

1. Johnson, Michael P. and James L. Roark. *Black masters: a free family of color in the old South*. New York: Norton, 1984, 14.

2. Ibid., 11-13.

2. Ibid., 13-16.