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# **George Milford Willett**

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GEORGE NILFORD WILLETT 1817-1890

> LEE ANNE RENEW HISTORY 300 DR. WARLICK

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### Preface

George Milford Willett was born in Milford, New Jersey, on November 4, 1817, and came to Savannah, Georgia in 1836. He married a native Savannahian, Maria B. Barthelmess, in 1839 and the couple eventually had five children; these were Ella Iola, Laura, Georgia, George M. Willett, Jr., and Emma Florence. At various times during his life, George worked as a carpenter, brick maker, and railroad conductor. He spent a great deal of time involved in various business transactions or court cases which were related to his occupations. George M. Willett died from paralysis of the heart on October 25, 1890, at the age of 73.

### Family Life

Strangely enough, it is George Milford Willett's death that gives me the first clues to his birth and early life. From his tombstone at Laural Grove Cemetary, I learned that George was born on November 4, 1817, in Milford, New Jersey. From his obituary, I know that he came to Savannah, Georgia in 1836. This left a gap in his early life and so I wrote to four historical societies in New Jersey. While the Camden County Historical Society could not give me any direct information about George, they were kind enough to send me some information about the Village of Milford as it was shortly before George came to Savannah. Milford is located in northwestern New Jersey, in Hunterdon County. The village is located on the Delaware River and acquired its name in about 1804 because a series of mills were built upon the location. In 1834, Milford had only 15 to 20 homes, a grist mill, two saw mills, and two churches; one church was Presbyterian and the other Unitarian. In the 1630's, Milford was particularly active in the lumber trade.

Apart from this, I was unable to find any information about George until his arrival in Savannah in 1836. By 1839, he had met and married Maria B. Barthelmess. The marriage between George and this 19 year old spinster took place on May 29, and was officiated by J.G. Binney, pastor of the Baptist Church. Maria was a native Savannahian born on October 26, 1820. The daughter of John and Catherine Barthelmess, Maria came from a family of at least six children. In late 1843, George and Maria had their first child, a daughter; this girl was born on December 28, and named Ella Iola. Following Ella by four years was another daughter named Laura, who was born on March 9, 1847. On September 10, 1849, a third daughter was born and named Georgia. By about this time, George must

have begun wondering whether or not he was ever going to have a son.

Whatever his feelings, I do not think he was disappointed or upset by the birth of his only son around 1851, because he proceeded to name the child George Milford Willett, Junior. 12 The Willett family was finally completed in 1853, with the birth of a fourth daughter who was named Emma. 13 I am assuming that the Willett children led fairly normal lives or did nothing outstanding during their childhoods, because they were not mentioned in any Savannah newspapers or in any legal documents of the time.

### Occupations, Businesses, and Finances

Throughout his lifetime, George Willett supported his family in a number of ways; the occupations he held ranged from carpenter to brick-maker to railroad conductor. Up to the Civil War, George was a man of considerable means; after the war, his financial situation deteriorated. 17

Sometime after arriving in Savannah, George began working as a carpenter. This was definitely the case by 1842, because in that year Mrs. Ann Pittman, a financially distressed widow, 18 was forced to mortgage some of her property to George; she owed him the sum of \$1,181.72 for work he performed as a carpenter. 19 In two deeds of 1844, George held liens against the homes of Patrick O'Connell and John Kolleher; O'Connell was indebted to George for \$115.50, while Kolleher owed him \$138.00. 20 While neither of these documents specifically state so, I believe that the debts were also owed to Willett for his work as a carpenter.

By 1846, Willett had probably switched to masonry, because he occupied a brickyard out at Thunderbolt Road; 21 and in the Georgia Population Census of 1850, his occupation was listed as mason.

During the 1840's, George went into debt; in 1845, he found himself indebted to the Bank of the State of Georgia for the sum of \$1,000,22

When by 1847, George had not paid off this debt, the Bank acquired a tenyear lease on a half lot in Elbert Ward. 23 At the time, George was renting this Perry Street property from his father-in-law, John Barthelmess. 24
It is possible that George paid off the Bank debt with money borrowed from
Levi Bates. He entered into an indenture with Bates in order to pay off
a \$1,000 promissory note dated January 5, 1847; 25 the indenture in which the
Bank acquired the lease to the western half of 31 Elbert Ward was dated
January 2, 1847. I am assuming that these two debts are in some way
related, because they are for exactly the same amount and are dated very
close to one another.

Aside from the Elbert Ward property, Ceorge purchased some land out at White Bluff Road, in 1849; the Flanters Bank of the State of Georgia sold him about 100 acres for \$420.00.<sup>27</sup> George did not move the family out to this land. Instead, he moved into a home that he had had built on Lot 70 in Crawford Ward, (now known as 218-220 East Liberty Street).<sup>28</sup> The house, now a duplex, appears as a rather unadorned, three-level dwelling that is stucced on brick. While not particularly attractive from the outside, it is similar to other homes in the neighborhood. According to the Ward Book at Georgia Historical Society, George was granted this Liberty Street property by the Mayor and Aldermen of the city of Savannah in 1849. While I was unable to locate the deed in which this transaction occurred, I do know that George was paying taxes for improvements upon the property by 1851.<sup>29</sup>

George Willett's life during the 1850's and 1860's must have been anything but boring. He spent roughly the next twenty years either indebted to someone, with someone indebted to him, or in court because of these dealings. By 1852, George had a carpentry company named appropriately

enough, George M. Willett & Go., in which he and John Dupon worked as carpenters. 30 At one time, in an attempt to collect on a debt of \$715.50, George and John found themselves holding the mortgage of a confectionery store called the Paris House. 31

Late in 1852, George decided to switch from carpentry to the brick-making business. So on December 23 of that year, he entered into a co-partnership with William G. Stafford under the firm name of Willett & Stafford. The two gentlemen agreed to the copartnership for a period of five years in which they would engage in brick-making on several tracts of land known formerly as Springfield Plantation. The About a year after this pertnership was formed, Stafford became indebted to George for \$13,000; for security, he mortgaged his half interest in the Springfield Plantation lots to Willett. Stafford eventually paid off the debt and recovered his interest in the land. After this, I found no further mention of the firm of Willett & Stafford.

By mid-1856, for reasons not stated, George was ready to sell his home on Liberty Street. On July 11, he sold the house and property to Daniel J. Philbrick for the sum of \$6,500. Tr. Philbrick's biographer discusses the transaction as occurring with relative ease and with no problems. However, later notations on the deed in which the transfer of the property occurred read as follows: "This mortgage closed and execution issued June 15, 1859; which execution was transferred by G.M. Willett to Hiram Roberts, and by Hiram Roberts transferred to John N. Lewis, Treasurer. The aforesaid execution is marked cancelled and satisfied in full. February 22, 1867." I do not understand this notation as later, the hax Digest of 1857 shows that Philbrick paid taxes upon the property and in 1863, he sold both parts of the duplex to ive different gentlemen. 38

In 1857, George finally purchased the western half of Lot 31 in Elbert Ward; he bought it from his sister-in-law, Laura Meil, who had inherited the property from her father, John Barthelmess. 39 George had a home on this property at 211 Perry Street and it was here that he died in 1890. 40

The latter part of the 1850's erded pretty much the same way as it had begun, that is, with various individuals indebted to George. In the case of John Hogan, the debt was for \$1,416.33,41 and with John Gilliland, it was \$2,800; in both instances, George held the mortgages to certain properties of these men while the debts were being paid off. In an interesting deed of 1856, James P. Mell was indebted to George for the sum of \$1,500; so he granted to George half interest in letters patent for a Sea Island Cotton Gin and the rights to a plough stock that he had invented. 43

George Willett was only 42 when the Civil War broke out in 1860, however, there was no evidence that suggested that he participated in the war on either side; but George did own a small number of slaves who were used in his household or businesses. George apparently did not fare too well financially during the war. Conditions must have been pretty bad, because his obituary states that the war was one reason his finances went so badly, prior to this time, George had had a considerable amount of money. However, in 1866, he was able to purchase from William Battersby some land valued at \$10,000; the property consisted of 54 acres located in the Village of Montgomery. The Willett's spent a number of years on this property in the 1870's and 1880's. While there, George ran a company that manufactured wood for such articles as doors, wheels, and farm implements; however, this venture lost a considerable amount of money and had an adverse effect upon his finances.

In 1868, George decided to dispose of the property on White Bluff Road

which he had purchased in 1849 for \$420.00. Nineteen years later, the 100 acres of land and the improvements upon it brought George \$20.000. 51

It was around the late 1860's that George decided to switch occupations altogether and become an employee of the railroad. His newspaper oblituary stated that he "served as master mechanic and superintended the building of the first passenger coach that ever went over the Central Railroad." He also worked for a time as a conductor on the Isle of Hope branch of the railroad. In 1872, a newspaper article remarked on the reinstatement of three of the oldest railroad conductors by the railroad company, (including G.M. Willett, Jr.); these men had refused to sign a document releasing the company from responsibility if they were injured on the job. I believe that the newspaper made a mistake and actually meant to list G.M. Willett, Sr., because even though George's son worked for the same railroad, he was only 21 in 1872.

An interesting case connected with George's job as a conductor came up in 1875 when he, along with Mr. George W. Alley who was superintendent of the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad, were charged with violating the Civil Rights Bill of 1875. George was accused of forcing a young black woman and her husband, Emil Pollard, from a railroad car. The couple brought suit against Willett and Alley in court and sought damages. This case dragged on in court until late 1880. It was then that Judge Erskine of the U.S. Circuit Court "quashed" the indictment; Pollard could not appeal the decision because the statute of limitations had run out. 56 Guilty or not, George and Mr. Alley got away with it.

George Willett's finances from about the age of 48, until his death, took a downward trend. At some time during his life, George made some investments out west, but these ended in failure and further contributed

to his financial downfall. <sup>57</sup> George also ran into a number of problems in Savannah. In 1869, he was forced to go to Superior Court in order to secure payment on a debt of \$1,219.52. <sup>58</sup> Later that year, George found himself being taken to court for nonpayment of a debt of \$200.00. Masy Henderson was able to get the court to order Willett to pay him \$130.00 plus interest for a year. <sup>59</sup> In 1872, a slightly different suit was brought against Willett. Mr. Miller B. Grant claimed that he performed work at George's Montgomery property that was worth \$507.57. George claimed that Grant only drew up some plans for tin buildings and that this work was only worth about \$25.00; he was more than willing to pay Mr. Grant this sum of money. Willett's lawyer, from the firm of Earlow & Levy, unsuccessfully defended him because the case was settled in favor of the plaintiff. George was ordered by the judge to pay to Grant \$407.55 plus damsges. <sup>50</sup>

Again in 1872, George was ordered by a judge in Superior Court to deliver a fee simple title for a small tract of his Montgomery property, to the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad Co. The company wanted to use the land to complete their railroad line to Montgomery. The tract only consisted of about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  acres and yet George delayed the matter to the point that he was finally taken to court and defeated. Around this time. George was also having difficulty paying his taxes, such as in 1875; in December of that year, part of George's Montgomery property was sold by the sheriff in front of the courthouse.

By 1882, the remainder of Willett's Montgomery property had been disposed of by other courthouse auctions or simply by selling the land. Start I was unable to find any further mention of business transactions by George and so I assume that he retired sometime around 1883.

### Descendants

Maria Willett, George's wife of 45 years, died from heart disease when she was 63 years old in 1884. 65 Maria had had financial resources of her own, possibly from inheritances, and she had invested in railroad stock and land. 66 Because of this, she was able to leave a life tenancy for her husband and fair sized inheritances for each of her children. 67 Ceorge Willett lived the remaining years of his life at his Perry Street home. He died on October 25, 1890, from paralysis of the heart; 68 he was buried next to Maria at Laural Grove Cemetary. Surviving Ceorge were his only son, Ceorge M. Willett, Jr., and three of his daughters: Laura Mathuss, Georgia E. Metzger, and Emma F. Nagle. 69

The class daughter, Ella Iola, had married Alexander Armstrong on October 28, 1868. 70 They had four children: Iola, Emmie, Benjamin, and Frank. 71 Ella died when she was only 34 in 1878. 72 Her daughter Iola married Robert Preston Warner in 1887. 73 Robert Warner died and left a will in which he listed six heirs. Two adult hoirs were Francis W. Brooks and Robert P. Warner, Jr. I found no further mention of these individuals in marriage or will records. In addition, there were four minor heirs mentioned in Warner's will; these were Vera Alberta Starnes, Fay Warner, Mildred Warner, and Ada Warner. 74 As with the older children, I was unable to locate any records of marriages or wills.

George Willett's next grandchild, Emmie Armstrong, had by 1897 become Mrs. Emma C. Wallace. The found no record of this marriage or any reference to her husband, any children they might have had, or a will.

Benjamin Armstrong can not be located in either the marriage or will index.

The last Armstrong child, Frank, married Miss Annie Theresz Rouch on September 13, 1892.<sup>76</sup> In Frank Armstrong's will, there is mention of a son named Albert C. Armstrong.<sup>77</sup> As far as I can find, Albert is not

living in Savannah, and he left no will in Chatham County if he died.

George and Maria Willett's next child was Laura. On March 7, 1866, Laura married William Mathuss. 78 The couple had three children, Laura, George W., and Augustus D. Mathuss. 79 William Mathuss died in 1875, but his wife survived him by 29 years, 80 William and Laura's daughter, Laura, became Mrs. John W. Manning in 1887. Blaura Manning's will of 1908 makes no mention of any children the couple might have had; and John Manning left no will. I did locate a will for the Mathuss' son, George Mathuss. This son remained in Savannah and married a woman named Beulah. From George's will, I learned that they had four sons: William Zack Mathuss, George M. Mathuss, Harold W. Mathuss, and Marion Mathuss. I found no further mention of these sons with the exception of Willaim Z. Mathuss. It turns out that his wife, Mrs. Bessie Evans Mathuss, became administratix of her father-in-law's estate. There was explanation offered in the administration papers of 1962, and so I am guessing that William Z. Mathuss must have become disabled or died by that time. 83 mention of Augustus D. Mathuss in any of the records I checked.

The middle child in the Willett family was Georgia, who on April 10, 1883, married William W. Metzger.

Georgia died on February 10, 1910, while Willaim lived until 1919.

Altogether, they had seven children.

One child, Willie, died when he was only a year old in 1883.

In order to make things as clear as possible, I am listing the information I found on the remaining Metzger children, as it appeared in a legal document of 1964; in this, Mary Metzger Woods petitioned the court to become executrix of the estate of her father, William W. Metzger. Article six of the petition reads as follows:

"At the time of his death, the deceased (Nilliam W. Metager) left surviving as next of kin and heirs at law, in addition to

his wife, Georgia E. Metzger, the following six children, to-witt Alice Metzger, Walter Metzger, Florence Metzger, George Metzger, Mary Metzger Woods, Wellie Metzger. At this date, Georgia Metzger, wife of decedent, is also deceased as are all of the children listed in the preceding sentence with the exception of the petitioner. Alice Metzger departed this life in Savannah, Ceorgia, on December 8, 1956, leaving no issue; Walter Metzger departed this life in Savannah, Georgia, on February 3, 1954, leaving two daughters whose names and addresses are as follows: Kathleen Rogers, Jacksonville, Florida, and Louise Stedeford, 1815 Mayview Road, Jacksonville, Florida; Florence Metzger Sheffield died in Savanmah, Georgia, on May 24, 1951, leaving a son, Walter Sheffield, whose present address is 2640 Peachtree Road, Atlanta, Ca; Florrie Sheffield Inglesby, the daughter of Florence Sheffield, died in Savannah, Ca., on Nov. 21, 1938, leaving no issue; George Metzger died in Atlanta, Ga., on May 31, 1954, leaving one son, George C. Metzger, Jr., whose address is Hurley Road, Salt Point, New York; Nellie Metzger departed this life in Atlanta, Ga., on June 23, 1963, leaving no issue."87

I wrote letters to Louise Stedeford in Fla., Walter Sheffield in Atlanta, and Mary Metzger Woods in Atlanta. My letter to Mr. Sheffield's address was returned to me, and as of 8-1-79. I received no answers from the others.

On January 29, 1873, George Willett's only son married Mrs. Melissa Dawson. 88

Like his father, George Jr., worked for the railroad. 89 At one point, he and

A.M. Barbee, Jr., attempted to run a restaurant at the Isle of Hope; but
this venture failed. 90 George and Melissa Willett had one child, a daughter
named Daisy E. Willett. 91 George died on April 30, 1930, leaving no will.

Melissa died in 1932, leaving a will in which she left everything to her
only child by George Willett, Jr., Daisy E. Willett. 93 I found no record
of a marriage for Daisy and no will.

George and Maria Willett's youngest child was Emma Florence. On Oct. 28, 1883, she married David J. Nagle. The couple had three children, but none of these children survived their parents. The oldest child, David Nagle, was born in 1884 and died in 1892; Charlie Nagle was born in 1888 and died in 1892. The Nagle's only daughter, Emma Florence "Flossie" Nagle, lived in Columbus, Ga., at the time of her death in 1913; she was 21 years old. Savid J. Nagle died on October 29, 1923; Emma lived until July 24, 1926.

The entire Nagle family is buried together in a lot at Laural Grove Cemetary. 97

## Epilogue

From researching the life of George Milford Willett, I received the impression that this man was a "dyed in the wool, wheeler-dealer." I drew this conclusion from the extent and types of his various business transactions.

A great deal can be noted about the less personal side of George Willett by following him in the newspapers and courts. Less can be said about George as a private individual, but the obituary for "the man who built the first passenger car for the Central Railroad," sums him up very interestingly by saying that he was "quite odd and eccentric, but at all times good company and a genial companion." 98

### **FOOTNOTES**

- 1 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), October 26, 1890, p. 2, c. 4.
- 2 The New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, New, Jersey; Camden County Historical Society, Camden, New Jersey; Hunterdon County Historical Society, Flemington, New Jersey; Burlington County Historical Society, Burlington, New Jersey. All responded, but Camden was the only one that really helped.
  - 3 Honeyman, ed. Northwestern New Jersey, Volume II, 1927, pp. 855-856.
  - 4 Cordon, Cazetteer and History of New Jersey, 1834, pp. 179-180.
  - 5 Protecte Court, Indexes to Marriages, 1806-1851, p.269.
  - 6 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #1050.
  - 7 Probate Court, Will #285.
  - 8 Chatham County Census of 1850 Abstracts, at Georgia Historical Society.
  - 9 Laural Crove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #1049.
  - 10 laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #1050.
  - 11 Laural Crove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #139.
  - 12 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #1050.
  - 13 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #2283.
  - 14 Superior Court, Deed #30, Book 3-A.
  - 15 Superior Court, Deed #420, Book 3-K.
  - 16 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), January 9, 1872, p. 3, c. 2.
  - 17 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), October 26, 1890, p. 2, c. 4.
  - 18 Savanrah Biographies, Volume III, Ann Pitman, by David R. Dorondo.
  - 19 Superior Court, Deed #30, Book 3-A.
  - 20 Superior Court, Deed #526-527, Book 3-B.
  - 21 Superior Court, Deed #297, Book 3-D.
  - 22 Superior Court, Deed #240, Book 3-C.
  - 23 Superior Court, Deed #34, Book 3-E.
  - 24 Superior Court, Deed #35, Book 3-E.
  - 25 Superior Court, Deed #43, Book 3-E.

- 26 Superior Court, Deed #34, Book 3-E.
- 27 Superior Court, Deed #540, Book 3-R.
- 28 Ward Book at Georgia Historical Society, Crawford Ward.
- 29 Tax Digest of 1851, Georgia Historical Society.
- 30 Superior Court, Deed #35, Book 3-K.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Superior Court, Deed #420, Book 3-K.
- 33. Superior Court, Deed #13, Book 3-M.
- 34 Superior Court, Deed #382, Book 3-Q.
- 35 Superior Court, Deed #380, Book 3-P.
- 36 Savannah Biographies, Volume III, Daniel Philbrick, by Charles C. Ferris.
- 37 Superior Court, Deed #380, Book 3-P.
- 38 Same as # 36.
- 39 Superior Court Deed #392, Book 3-Q.
- 40 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), October 26, 1890, p. 2, c. 4.
- 41 Superior Court Deed #504, Book 3-R.
- 42 Superior Court Deed, #379, Book 4-N.
- 43 Superior Court Deed #411, Book 3-R.
- 44 Superior Court Deed #264, Book 3-R.
- 45 Superior Court Deed #420, Book 3-K.
- 46 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), October 26, 1890, p.2, c. 4.
- 47 Superior Court, Deed #143, Book 3-X.
- 48 Savannah Citiy Directories, 1866-1890, Georgia Historical Society...
- 49 Same as Footnote #46.
- 50 Superior Court, Deed #540, Book 3-R.
- 51 Superior Court, Deed #250, Book 4-A.
- 52 Same as Footnote #46.
- 53 Savannah Morning News Degest, August 5, 1875, p. 395.

- 54 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), January 9, 1872, p.3 c. 2.
- 55 Savannah City Directory, 1874.
- 56 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), December 2, 1880, p. 3, c. 3.
  - 57 Savannah Morning News, October 26, 1890.
- 58 Chatham Superior Court, May Term of 1869, Judgement #10383, George Willett vs. William R. Symons.
- 59 Chatham Superior Court, December 16, 1869, Judgement #10405 Masey Henderson vs, George Willett.
- 60 Chatham Superior Court, January 1872, Judgement #10864, Miller Grant vs. George Willett.
  - 61 Superior Court Deed #30, Book 4-S.
  - 62 Savannah Morning News Digest, December 14, 1875, p. 545.
  - 63 Savanrah Morning News Digest, August 8, 1876, p. 31.
  - 64 Superior Court Deed #420, Book 5-D.
  - 65 Chatham County Health Center, Vital Records.
  - 66 Probate Court, Will #462.
  - 67 Ibid.
  - 68 Chatham County Health Center, Vital Records.
  - 69 Savannah Morning News, October 26, 1890.
  - 70 Probate Court, Index to Marriages, 1866-1873, p. 2.
  - 71 Probate Court, Will #462.
  - 72 Chatham County Health Center, Vital Records.
  - 73 Probate Court, Marriage Licenses, Book F p. 444.
  - 74 Probate Court, Will #1012.
  - 75 Probate Court, Will #1886.
  - 76 Probate Court, Marriages Licenses, April 20, 1891, to Dec. 21, 1892,
  - 77 Probate Court, Will #389.
  - 78 Probate Court, Index to Marriages, 1851-1866.
  - 79 Probate Court, Will #956.

- 80 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot 1050.
- 81 Probate Court, Record of Marriages, Book G, p. 9.
- 82 Probate Court, Will #1030.
- 83 Probate Court, Will #1738.
- 84 Probate Court, Index to Marriages, 1866-1873.
- 85 Laural Grove Cemetary, tembstone, lot #139.
- 86 Savannah Morning News Degest, April 11, 1883.
- 87 Probate Court, Will #1305.
- 88 Probate Court, Index to Marriages, 1866-1873.
- 89 Savannah City Directory, 1874.
- 90 Superior Court, Deed #42, Book 7-L.
- 91 Probate Court, Will #1382.
- 92 Laural Grove Cemetary Records, Georgia Historical Society.
- 93 Probate Court, Will #1382.
- 94 Probate Court, Marriage Licenses, Book D, p. 486.
- 95 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #2283.
- 96 Laural Grove Cemetary Records, G.H.S.
- 97 Laural Grove Cemetary, tombstone, lot #2283.
- 98 Savannah Morning News (Micro-Film), October, 26, 1890, p. 2, c. 4.

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- 7. Honeyman, ed., Morthwestern New Jersey, Volume III, 1927, pp. 855-856.
- 8. Hunterdon County Historical Society, Flemington, New Jersey.
- 9. Laural Crove Cemetary-Keeper's Book.
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- 11. New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, New Jersey.
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- 17. Savannah Tax Digests, 1836-1890, Georgia Historical Society.
- 18. Superior Court, Deeds.
- 19. Superior Court, Judgements, 1869-1911.
- 20. Mard Books, Georgia Historical Society.