

Ocracoke Island is a magical place with a host of interesting characters. It has always been so.

John Williams, III was born on Ocracoke in 1804. He was the grandson of the island's first John Williams (ca. 1727 - 1787) who purchased one half of Ocracoke Island from William Howard, Sr. in September of 1759. John Williams Jr. (ca. 1750 - 1837) was a patriot who served as commissary (deputy) to James Anderson, captain of the "Ocracoke Company" during the War for Independence.

Between 1829 and 1848 John Williams III and his wife, Euphemia, had nine children. Not a single descendant lives on Ocracoke Island today. In fact, John & Euphemia may not have any descendants. Five of their children either died before maturity or left the island, not to be heard from again. Three of their children never married.

Only one child, William, married and remained on Ocracoke. He, in turn, fathered only one son, Samuel Keech Williams. Sam Keech, as he was called, never married.

William (known to all as Wid) became a local legend for his musical abilities. Although he died over 100 years ago he is still remembered on the island for the outstanding fiddle playing he contributed to the Saturday square dances.

Wid's sister, Arcadia, was just as memorable as her brother, but for different reasons. Walter Howard, self-educated native islander and local polymath, remembers her in his account of the 1837 wreck of the steamboat "Home." You can read the entire story [here](#), but for our present purposes his vivid description of Arcadia and life on Ocracoke in the mid-nineteenth century is worth repeating.

Walter begins his tale thus:

"When I was a small boy, I used to sit at night and listen to the older people tell of the shipwrecks along the coast of North Carolina, especially around Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Island where I was born. 'God help the sailors on a night like this!' was, and is to this day, a household saying in our section of the country.

"Old Arcadia Williams, who has been dead these many years [Walter wrote his story in 1952], is responsible for the tale I'm about to tell. We will call her 'Kade' as that was her nickname. Kade 'slept out.' What I mean by that is she didn't sleep at home by herself, but always slept at some neighbor's house. Kade's people had been dead for years and she was all alone and afraid to sleep at home for fear, as she said, of being 'taken with the miseries'

and dying without anyone knowing about it.

“Kade lived in an old house framed entirely from the beams of old shipwrecks. The rafters and sills still contained the bopper bolts and wooden pegs used in the original construction of some unfortunate derelict of the seas. The stairs were fashioned from a companionway which had been salvaged from a square rigger. The clock over the fireplace had been designed for some ‘Queen of the Seas.’ There were wooden windows (as little glass was used in those days) and a wooden chimney which was always a source of wonder to me. I could never understand why it never caught on fire with so many sparks flying up its sooty exit, but it never did. Kade still did her cooking in the fireplace. The boys wanted to take up a collection to buy her a stove but she would have none of it. Her excuse was that old Ben Franklin was an infidel and that she would have none of his doings or inventions in her house, that the fireplace had been good enough for her folks and it would have to be good enough for her.

“Kade could ‘cuss like a sailor’ and woe be unto anyone who ‘ruffled’ her feathers the wrong way, or should by any chance, be the recipient of her caustic, venomous tongue lashing. She is still remembered today for her biting wit and vitriolic sarcasm. Aside from those human weaknesses she was a good soul and didn’t have an enemy in the world. As a story teller her equal has never been found, by this writer at least.

“It was my good fortune that Kade stayed at our house for five consecutive years. Although she could not read or tell the time by the clock, her arrival and departure didn’t vary thirty seconds. She also had the misfortune of being a cripple. She was a short, squat woman with a friendly, round face which boasted of countless fine wrinkles. She parted her hair in the center and drew it into a tight knot terminating in the nape of her neck where she fastened it with two wire nails whose protruding heads gave the appearance that a carpenter had been trying to nail her head fast to her body without any marked success.

“She wore a suit of red flannel underwear, seven or eight underskirts and leg-of-mutton shirt waist buttoned down the front, a slat bonnet of a dark grayish material and a black dress whose hem always touched the ground. A cane made from a broom handle served the same purpose as a centerboard and at the same time accelerated locomotion.

“A deep pocket was made on the inside of the outer dress for a snuff box which was a half-pound size baking powder can. Last but not least she wore a small checked apron with an additional pocket for her toothbrush. Not the kind of brush we use for scrubbing our teeth, as that art of hygiene and personal cleanliness was wholly unknown to her as it was to the rest of the Islanders. Kade’s toothbrush was a small branch or twig from the black gum tree

about ten or twelve inches long (varying, of course, in length at the user's discretion) of which the larger end was chewed for an indefinite period of time until a mop had been formed in the shape of a whisk broom. This was then opened in the manner of a shaving brush and dipped into the snuff box until the proper amount of snuff had accumulated with the aid of saliva. Then the so-called toothbrush would be inserted into the mouth, and 'seated' in the jaw forming a lump about the size of a goose egg, and giving the alarming appearance to the casual observer that she had concealed an inflated balloon in her cheek, or was suffering from a large wen which had formed spontaneously on that side of her face. That filthy snuff dipping habit is still practiced today in this section of the island, although only by a few of the older people.

A Blackgum Toothbrush:



"We were not allowed to speak during the time that this snuff dipping marathon was in progress, for fear we might upset the equilibrium of this pastime. Sometimes my grandmother would begin her dipping just about the time Kade had finished hers, thereby prolonging the suspense out of pure cussedness. Finally the snuff dipping came to an end and Kade settled back in her chair and commenced [her] narrative."

As mentioned above, you can read Walter's entire story [here](#). However, Kade was a colorful character and the subject of other tales. The following story came down to me through Walter's brother, Edgar Howard, himself a talented raconteur and banjo player (his tombstone on Howard Street features a banjo and the epitaph "You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet!").

It seems that Arcade and her neighbor, Caswell Williams, had a row and were squabbling over a boundary line. Eventually the issue escalated and it came before the "court." Perry Coleman Howard was the island magistrate and the proceedings were held in his parlor.

Magistrate P. C. Howard:



Arcade called a neighbor, Mary O'Neal Williams, as witness for her defense. At the time of the hearing, Mary Williams failed to show up. Coleman waited more than half an hour. Finally losing patience, he sent a messenger to Mary's home to fetch her. When the runner returned to the court he declared that "Miss Med," as she was called, told him that she would be there as soon as her collards were finished cooking.

Coleman had had enough. Without waiting for Miss Med he determined that he had actually heard sufficient evidence and ruled in favor of Caswell. He fined Arcade \$5.00.

Kade was not pleased. Without a word she turned her back to the magistrate and hobbled away. When she reached the door she leaned on her cane, turned her head back to the court, and announced "If you want that five dollars, Coleman, you'll have to get it out of this." And with that she slapped her rear end and marched outside.