

Jason Miller

Interview with Jason Miller

—*Stiles M. Scruggs, Columbia, S.C.*

STORY OF HIS GRANDMOTHER'S PRAYER

Jason Miller, a dark-colored Negro 77 years old, lives on a farm five and a half miles from Eastover, S.C., and claims that he is a grandson of Nancy Williams, whose prayer saved a ship at sea.

"My daddy was Thomas Miller and my mammy was Bernice Williams Miller, de youngest daughter of Nancy Williams. I was born in Orangeburg County in 1860, on de farm where we lived at dat time. My mammy die when I was 'bout turnin' into 16 years old and my daddy never marry no more.

"He owns 'bout 15 acres and de house we lives in and he rent more land close to us. We 'most always has plenty to eat and wear, 'cause we works de land and keeps it fit to produce food and money crops. When my daddy got too old to work much, me and my wife and our two chillun was livin' wid him.

"He never turn over de home nor de lands to me while he was livin' and I follow right in his tracks. I owns a house and 31 acres and my son and his wife and two chillun live wid me. My wife die nigh on to 15 years ago, but I is still single and right glad of it. I now owns de farm and is still boss dere. I has a reason for not turnin' them over while I lives.

"I has seen many cases, where de head of de house turn over all his belongin's to de son who move in. In most of dese cases, de head of de house become no more pow'ful than a child and often when he give it all out, he get sent to de poorhouse, to boot.

"So I still holds de whuphand for keepin' de peace and countin' one, besides. Tom does most of de sowin', plowin', and reapin'. I still makes a hand, choppin' or pickin' cotton and I digs de 'taters, too. And when it come to sellin', why I cracks de whup, 'stead of bein' on de beggin' side at home.

"Yes, sah, my daddy was a slave and I was born a slave. My grandmammy, Nancy Williams, was set plum free by her Marster Williams at Charleston, when she was just a little gal, lak. She still stay wid dis fine seagoin' family, and dat's why she was a stewardess on de ship, where Marster Williams was de captain.

"De ship was makin' de return trip from Wilmington, N.C. to Charleston, S.C. in 1847, when de big storm break on de sea. De biggest story 'bout what happen am told by Senator A.P. Butler, who was a passenger. My wife tell me, too. She say Senator Butler always look up and speak to my grandmammy when he come to Charleston and she say de Senator give grandmammy money, widout her askin' for it.

"My grandmammy sho' was known to white and black folks at Charleston and Wilmington as a Christian woman. She talk and pray for de seamen at both ports and when she livin' in Charleston, too old to serve de ship longer, de sailors often come to see her and fetch her presents of candy, coffee, flour,

sugar, blankets and such as they thought she need. When she die, my wife say de sailors carry de coffin to de grave and weep.

"As de storm tale come to me from my wife, who git it from her mammy, Nancy Williams, it 'bout lak dis: De ship carry folks and produce from Charleston to Wilmington and git a load of folks and produce at Wilmington, for Charleston. 'Bout 100 miles south of Wilmington a big storm rage, lightin' flash and de waves roll mountain high. De ship wobble, first on one end and then on de other, a squeakin' awful. Pretty soon de fires wetted out and it was out of man control. But it still pitchin' pow'ful.

"Knowin' all dis, Marster Williams summon all on deck and tell them de ship am doomed. Then he say to them: 'All you standin' side by each, git 'quainted, so if anybody git to land, they can tell what become of us!'

"It was then dat my grandmammy, de stewardess, step fo'ward and say: 'Marster Williams, dis am no time to git 'quainted! What we all better do is to kneel down and pray.'

"'I can't pray,' say Marster Williams. 'If you can pray, Stewardess, go ahead!'

"All de passengers and crew was standin' dere silent and tremblin'. Grandmammy fall on her knees and pray: 'Oh, God! We, thy erring chillun can do nothin'. You can do ever'thing. Save us, if it be Thy will but Thy will be done, not ours! Amen!'

"Then she rise up and smile sweet lak and 'bout dat time de light from a rescue ship, sent out from Wilmington to aid us, grandmammy say, shine in on us. All was saved. Many, white and black, sho' say grandmammy's prayer saved de ship and also say she am de only one who keep cool all de time. Senator Butler, who was a passenger, talk wid me once 'bout it. Long after he talk wid me, we git a book from Edgefield, in which Senator Butler tell de story, praising my grandmammy. We has that book at home now and no money could buy it."