

ZIMRI SHIRLEY — a man is measured

By Katherine Becker Barr

What is the measure of a man? His height? His wealth? His work ethic? His influence on others? Or, is it something more?

ZIMRI SHIRLEY was no ordinary man living out his eighty years in Tuscaloosa County, and yet he can be measured by the mark he made on his community and on his family. Zimri was born in Northport, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, on January 10, 1843, to Moses and Roena Shirley. As the second child and oldest son, he was given enormous responsibilities. His father, Moses Shirley, was a Northport merchant, farmer, and the first City Clerk of Northport.

Zimri was the grandson of an early Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, pioneer, Elizabeth Shirley, who migrated to Northport from Laurens County, South Carolina. She was the mother of Jonathan, James, and Moses Shirley, Zimri's father. Elizabeth Shirley died October 12, 1865 and is buried in the Old Robertson Cemetery in Northport.

When the colony of South Carolina was the new frontier, and land grants were plentiful, Zimri Shirley's ancestors forged a new life in the area of present day Laurens County. The Shirley family may have fought off Indian attacks that were frequent in this area. No doubt, they survived epidemics and starvation in the harsh, unfriendly environment of the colony, and yet these hard-working, sturdy, God-fearing men and women overcame many obstacles. Zimri Shirley was the product of this pioneer spirit.

In 1861, when he was eighteen, Zimri marched off to war. He fought bravely for the Confederacy, and in 1865, he was wounded at Hatcher's Run in Virginia only a few weeks shy of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. One of his granddaughters, Margaret Shirley Strickland, told this writer that her grandfather was called "a little red-faced rebel" while he valiantly attacked the Union forces at Chickamauga. One can almost see him swinging the sword he captured from one of the "Yankees" and giving a loud Rebel yell.

After returning to Northport, Zimri married Cherokee "Cherrie" Williamson, daughter of Dempsey and Rebecca Baugh Williamson. His work ethic proved to be the basis of his success, and his influence on others is legendary. He has been called "wise," "a gentleman," "a delight to be around," and "charitable."

Zimri understood the value of hard work and education. He insisted that his ten children, Velo, Katie Swan, Joseph Bolin, Mae Grace, Ludie Baugh, Addie Eggleston, James Searcy, Lewis Albert, and Marie Lenore receive the best education available to them. One of ten children, Mittie, died when she was six months old.

One of his granddaughters, Addie Shirley Hoole, remembered her father, James Shirley, telling the following story: When Jim and his brother Albert would go to town, Zimri would say, "Boys, you better not let dark catch you off this place!" This same James Searcy Shirley, the seventh of Zimri's ten children, evidently failed to heed his father's warnings one time too many and was



(Back L-R) Joe Shirley, Mae Shirley Daniel, Zimri Shirley, Conway Brasfield Shirley, Addie Shirley Foster, and Albert Shirley, Sr. (Front L-R) Albert Shirley, Jr., Louise Shirley, and Marie Shirley. The family is standing in front of their house on Queen City Avenue which now faces Dearing Place in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Photo taken ca. 1920.

"conveniently" sent to Sumter County, Alabama, given a farm of approximately 1,000 acres, and expected to become a "Gentleman Farmer."

Tall in stature Zimri was not, but he was tall in his convictions and noble character. By most standards of his day, he was wealthy, having inherited land from his father, Moses Shirley, and having been part-owner with his brother-in-law, Dr. James Williamson, of the successful Shirley and Williamson drug firm. Many referred to him as Dr. Shirley. According to Marvin Harper, a descendant of Joseph Shirley, one of Zimri's brothers, Zimri was elected Mayor of Tuscaloosa. He added that Zimri got his first business experience with his father, Moses Shirley, who owned property in Northport and a plantation west of town near present day Elrod.

On January 13, 1912, Zimri's beloved wife Cherrie died. He never remarried and continued to live in their large antebellum home on Queen City Avenue in Tuscaloosa, fondly referred

to as "the big house," until his death on October 5, 1923. The home now faces Dearing Place. One of his granddaughters, Anne Shirley McNeff, remembered his funeral. She and one of her cousins were around five years old when he died, and they were fascinated as they watched the Masons drop greenery into their grandfather's grave at Northport's Williamson Cemetery.

What kind of a man could be regarded as the patriarch of the family and not leave a lasting impression on those who knew and loved him? No doubt, his children respected him and possibly feared him, but to his grandchildren, Zimri Shirley was "Big Papa." The stories that remain were etched in the minds and hearts of those children and were shared with this writer.

Nothing was too good for his grandchildren. He expected all of them to follow the path of enlightenment even if they were born in Sumter County. When many of them reached school age, he insisted that

they be brought to Tuscaloosa and properly educated – no questions asked! After all, he was the patriarch, and he knew what was best for his family members, no matter how old they were.

As the grandchildren gathered around him in “the big house,” he developed a peculiar habit. Each morning, he would go throughout the house, bang on a dish pan with a spoon, and wake up the little ones. It would not do for a Shirley to be late for school. Louise Shirley Becker Charnock lived in “the big house” for many years and swore that the house was haunted! According to Louise, her grandfather, Zimri, would wake them up and then proceed to have the servants sweep the side and back yard.

Christine Shirley Sanders reminisced about her grandfather’s visits to Sumter County, as they were occasions for making great preparations in the kitchen and on the farm. Zimri enjoyed life and good food and always sat at the head of the dinner table where he was served his favorite foods—boiled custard, fried bread (hoecake), and chicken pie. “It was a big event when Big Papa came to visit. We knew who he was, and we always enjoyed his company.” Christine giggled, “I can see him eating the boiled custard and getting it in his whiskers.” She recalled that her grandfather was interested in the crops and would walk daily with his son Bolin to see if they had planted the crops right and how they were doing. It was a big event when Big Papa made a visit to Sumter County.

It seems that Zimri did not like his name and did not want any of his children to name their children for him. Orders were orders! However, later

on, he changed his mind and bemoaned the fact that he did not have a namesake until granddaughter Addie Zimri “Zimmie” Shirley was born. Zimmie was the daughter of Joseph Bolin Shirley. It must have been a proud day for the old soldier.

Sunday afternoons after church, the patriarch would gather the men on the long back porch of his Tuscaloosa home for the usual discussions—the preacher’s sermon, the Bible, old war stories, and, of course, politics. Granddaughter Louise remembered that he would be at the center of any discussion and would take out his frustrations on an apple, which he would carefully peel and scrape with a little knife. The men discussed just about anything they could argue about, but the women were too frail to be involved in such serious “men talk.”

To be sure, the Zimri Shirley home was filled with continuous laughter, music, merriment, mischief, and scores of friends and family members. Christmas was everyone’s favorite time of year, and Zimri, supervised the trimming of the magnificent, elaborately decorated tree that reached the parlor ceiling. To the delight of the children, he made sure that it was surrounded by presents of all sizes and shapes.

Zimri Shirley truly made his mark on his community and on his family. He loved life, worked hard, fought for his beliefs, and instilled in his children and grandchildren Christian morals and values, the desire to live up to their God-given potential, and the belief that they should leave the world a better place than they found it. No matter how you measure a man, Zimri

Shirley stands tall.

In the summer of 2008, Marvin Harper asked this writer, Katherine Becker Barr, to write something about her great-grandfather, Zimri Shirley. The insight into “Big Papa’s” life and legacy was taken from several interviews with granddaughters Louse Shirley Becker Charnock, Anne Shirley McNeff, Addie Shirley Hoole, Christine Shirley Sanders, and Margaret Shirley Strickland, plus great-nephew Marvin Harper, without whose help the name of “Shirley” in Tuscaloosa County would be “gone with the wind.” This writer is deeply indebted to those who knew and loved Zimri Shirley, and “I desire to follow his advice from the grave to leave this world a better place than I found it for generations to come.”

Notes from Marvin Harper:

Zimri Shirley, a son of Moses and Roena Shirley, attended schools and church in Northport, Alabama during his early years. He was married to Cherokee Williamson at the Northport Methodist Church where he was an active member.

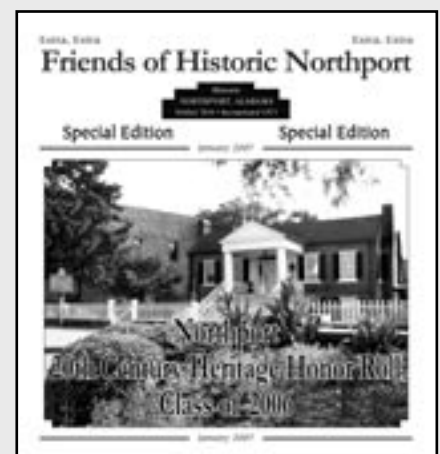
When his father died in 1878, Zimri served as executor of his estate. He urged his brother, Joseph Shirley, to return to Tuscaloosa County from Richland Parish, Louisiana, to live with and care for their widowed mother.

Zimri Shirley joined his brother-in-law, Dr. James Williamson, a medical doctor with an office in Tuscaloosa, to establish and operate a drug store. He also became an active community contributor in Tuscaloosa and was elected and served as mayor of Tuscaloosa for a two-year term in 1910.

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