

Martha Elliott White Wallis

The history of Fort Mill is like a colorful blanket woven with stories about the families who have made this town their home. While all of the stories are intriguing, some have added elements of mystery, romance, family drama, and even ghostly scenes. Very few stories, however, encompass all of these descriptions with the exception of one narrative, the story of Martha Elliott.

In 1802, Martha Elliot from Fort Mill was 27 years old when she married her first husband, Revolutionary War Captain Joseph White. The following year they became parents to a son they named William Elliot White. Unfortunately, their marriage was cut short when Joseph White died just two years after being wed to Martha. He left his family with a significant estate appraised at \$6,284.¹

Following her husband's death, Martha persevered by successfully running a cotton plantation with a cotton gin. Considering her wealth through this business, her land holdings, and being of a relatively young age, Martha most likely would have been considered an eligible widow with valuable assets.²

It took 14 years before Martha accepted a marriage proposal. This time it was from Reverend James Wallis, who was the pastor of Providence Presbyterian Church in Mecklenburg County. Wallis was 56 years old at the time, a graduate of the Mount Zion Institute of Winnsboro, served on the board of trustees at the University of North Carolina, authored a book on theology, and established an academy. He not only served as a pastor in North Carolina but also traveled to nearby churches in South Carolina who did not have a preacher. In 1810, one of these churches was Fort Mill's Unity Church, which may be where he first met Martha.³

This was not the Reverend's first marriage. His first wife, Jean Bain Alexander, was associated with a ghostly tale of dying twice. The story goes that Jean first died around 1810-1813 but soon after her burial she was discovered alive by grave robbers who came looking for her jewelry. She lived several more years before "officially" dying in 1816.⁴

Being buried prematurely is a fear that brings chills to many people for good reason. While we have procedures to prevent this from happening today, in the 19th century this was not just a story but a reality as pandemics, the plague, and other illnesses left people unconscious or in a coma. In London, during the early 1800s, bodies presumed to be dead were often taken to mortuaries or hospitals where they were held for several days before burial to look for body decomposition. Many safety coffin designs were also patented during this time. These coffins were equipped

¹ Louis Pettus, "Wealthy Widow Accepts Proposal," The York Observer, November 25, 1995.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

with bells, wires, air tubes, and flags to alert people above ground that the person underground was not dead.⁵

Although it is not clear if the story of Jean's premature burial was true and whether Wallis was suspected of any foul play, Martha did have Wallis sign a "Deed of Trust" before they were married. Known today as a prenuptial agreement, this deed, signed in May 1818, ensured that all of her estate holdings would be given to her son when she died, while Wallis would only receive \$500 if she should die first. Martha did die first from a liver ailment on October 23, 1819, less than two years from when she married Wallis.⁶

Following Martha's death, Wallis found out that Martha had a will written just before her passing. In this will she left most of her estate to 17-year-old son, William Elliot White, and only \$200 to the Reverend Wallis. Martha referenced that this money was just a "a small acknowledgment for the great care and attention he has paid me since our marriage." Not pleased with this new development, Wallis contested the distribution of her estate arguing that the original deed of trust he signed was by coercion, the wording of the deed was not lawful, the deed was never placed in the Secretary of State's office, and that the \$200 the will stated was contrary to the \$500 the deed had stated.⁷

Wallis did not attend the trial because he felt his life was in danger, but sent his son, from his first marriage, to represent him. Martha's witnesses included her brother, her sister, and her neighbors who stated they saw Wallis sign the original deed. They also agreed that Wallis did not oppose the deed and his only request was for Martha to live with him in his house in Mecklenburg County. Despite this request, the testimonies confirmed that Martha never moved into his residence and he never moved into her home in Fort Mill. Finally, on November 22, 1819, the judge overseeing the case, ruled that Martha's will was valid and that Wallis would only receive the \$200. Surprisingly, Wallis died less than five weeks after the judge's ruling.⁸

Thanks to Martha's persistence in preserving her estate for her son, William Elliot White went on to inherit Martha's estate and used some of his inheritance to build the home known today as the White Homestead.

⁵ Bob Boetticher, "Buried Alive, National Museum of Funeral History," March 9, 2022. <https://nmfh.org/buried-alive-boetticher/>. Site accessed on August 3, 2025; Lawrence Tarazano, "People Feared Being Buried Alive so Much They Invented These Special Safety Coffins," Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sponsored/people-feared-being-buried-alive-so-much-they-invented-these-special-safety-coffins-180970627/>. Site accessed on August 3, 2025.

⁶ Louis Pettus, "Wealthy Widow Accepts Proposal," The York Observer, November 25, 1995.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



Headstone for Martha Elliott White Wallis⁹
Old Unity Cemetery



Headstone for Reverend James Wallis¹⁰
Providence Presbyterian Church Cemetery

⁹ Photo from Find a Grave. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/37299313/martha-white_wallis. Site accessed on July 28, 2025.

¹⁰ Photo from Find a Grave. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/21753009/james-wallis>. Site accessed on July 28, 2025.

