

Wills and Probates
by Carol Coley Taylor

Several years ago I heard an attorney say that a will was worthless until the person who made the will died. At the time, I thought this was strange, especially since attorneys charge for drawing up a will. It wasn't until I began to work with wills and probates that I realized the validity of his statement.

The actual will can contain valuable information for the genealogist or it can be a document with little information. Not all wills are or were created equal. Many times the will simply states that the deceased left his home to his widow for her lifetime or until she remarried and that he gave a dollar to each of his children, all of whom are unnamed in the document. Certainly not much to go on and a waste of the usual ten dollars spent to order a copy from a distant courthouse or state archives.

However, sometimes you hit pay dirt. I recently ordered a will for Abraham Page from the South Carolina State Archives. I wasn't certain that Abraham was the father of my Matthew Page, and desperately hoped this document would prove a relationship. Bingo! When the photocopy of the will arrived in a short time, I might add, there was a list of all of Abraham's children, including my Matthew and the brothers with whom he moved to Mississippi in the 1850s.

I have a copy of the inventory of John G. Hardy, my great-great grandfather who has given me so much grief. No will remains. Hoping to find a clue to his father's identity, I found a list of his children, his assets and debts in the Inventory included in the probate packet. From the debts, I learned quite a bit about John G., but nothing about his

father. Wills seldom, if ever, provide information about parents unless one or both of the parents survive the deceased.

Recently I had the opportunity to examine a will and probate packet of an early 20th century doctor here in Texas. The heirs were a second wife and one child from the first marriage. The doctor had some property in a small community plus an eight acre farm where he raised race horses. The child was ten when the doctor died and his uncle was appointed guardian. From the information in the probate packet, the child was shipped off to boarding school and the guardian would submit annual reports of the child's expenses to the court. Most of these were routine expenses for clothing, books, tuition, etc. I found receipts for the upkeep of the house that went to the widow until her death or until she remarried. At that time the property went to the child.

If at all possible, look at the will, the inventory and everything in the probate packet. Follow through on every clue. One little piece of paper often holds the key to a very important event in an ancestor's life.