



## George William Willson

December 28, 1950 - July 29, 2019

George William Willson was born on December 28, 1950, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the third of four children born to Lt. Colonel George William Willson, Sr. and Irma Dippold Willson. George's parents met in England while serving in World War II. He was in the Air Force and she was a nurse. George grew upon a number of Air Force bases, before moving to Orlando as a teenager and graduating from Boone High School in 1969. He briefly attended Florida Technological University (now UCF) before deciding to join the Marine Corps. He served in Vietnam as a forward observer working with special operations in remote mountainous regions before contracting a “fever of unknown origin.” He was medevaced out of Vietnam and returned home by way of hospitals in Japan, Hawaii, Maryland and finally Jacksonville (where he proceeded to sneak out and drive home to Orlando!).

Upon his return, he enrolled at Valencia Community College, where he and Lynne met during their three shared classes. They began dating and eventually transferred to Florida State University where they married in a little chapel on campus in 1974. George pursued his undergraduate degree in International Affairs and a graduate degree in Urban and Regional Planning.

Inspired to preserve the natural world he loved so much, George pursued a career in the field of conservation. From 1977 to 1984 he served under several administrations at the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation where he oversaw many special projects throughout the state relating to river corridors, coastal zones, the Everglades, and water policy.

George next became the Director of Land Acquisition for the Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (1984-1999) and was involved in conserving more than 850,000 acres throughout the state. In 1999, George became Vice President for Conservation Lands at the St. Joe Company which offered the unique opportunity to pursue conservation projects on behalf of the largest landowner in the state.

In 2004 George left St. Joe and created his own consulting business. In this role he advised clients such as The Conservation Fund and many large landowners throughout the state. George had the honor of serving on a number of governing boards, including the Northwest Florida Water Management District, Audubon Florida, the Apalachee Land

Conservancy, the University of Florida's School of Forest Resources & Conservation, and the Tall Timbers Research Station.

In May 2014, George was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. After a series of treatments, George's cancer entered a period of remission allowing him to realize his lifelong goal of becoming a grandfather. George loved his family dearly and cherished the precious time he had with his three grandchildren. The cancer recurred in 2019 and George underwent another year of treatment. Four months before his death on July 30, George received a secondary diagnosis of plasma cell leukemia, a rare and aggressive progression of multiple myeloma. He was hospitalized in Gainesville for 5 weeks followed by Home Hospice care which allowed him to spend his remaining time visiting with friends and family.

Throughout his career George helped to protect over one million acres of environmentally sensitive lands. We will remember his passion, commitment, and unrelenting perseverance to protect Florida's natural lands and waters (especially in his beloved Florida panhandle) for generations to come.

George is survived by Lynne, his wife of 45 years; his daughter, Ashley Brown of Hood River, Oregon, her husband, Doug, and their 4-year old son, Nolan; son Michael of Tallahassee, his wife, Alyssa, and their 2-year old twins, Sam and Cait; two sisters, Mary Ficzer, of Montgomery, Alabama, and Patricia Elliott, of Fort Myers; and one brother, Tom, of Huntington Beach, California.

A funeral service will be held on Thursday, August 8 at 11:00 a.m. at the Tallahassee National Cemetery, 5015 Apalachee Parkway. A reception will immediately follow at 2136 Armistead Road, Tallahassee. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to one of the following:

\* Tall Timbers Land Conservancy Program (<https://talltimbers.org/support-tall-timbers-program-specific-giving/>)

\* Audubon Florida ([https://act.audubon.org/onlineactions/6NsReZmDnUWGLI948QzmvG2?ms=giving\\_page\\_56](https://act.audubon.org/onlineactions/6NsReZmDnUWGLI948QzmvG2?ms=giving_page_56))

\* Apalachicola Riverkeeper (<http://apalachicolariverkeeper.org/donate-now/>) ;

\* Apalachicola Bluffs and Ravines Preserve, checks payable to ABRP, 10394 NW Longleaf Dr., Bristol, FL 32321.

# Events

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**AUG** **Memorial Service** 11:00AM

**8**

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Tallahassee National Cemetery

5015 Apalachee Pkwy, Tallahassee, FL, US, 32311

# Comments

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“ I had the pleasure of working with George over the course of three years in the early 1990s, negotiating the State’s purchase of Keewaydin Island near Naples. George worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between landowners, environmental advocates and their lawyers, and the local City Council to resolve a longstanding legal battle for the island and secure 2,700 acres of pristine barrier island for the Rookery Bay Reserve. I learned a great deal from George along the way, and will always cherish the friendship that we built during those years.

Gary Lytton

**Gary Lytton** - August 22, 2019 at 03:52 PM

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“ George and I worked together at DER. He was one of my favorite people to work with, full of energy and optimism. His service left a great legacy to the people of Florida.

Terry Cole

**Terry Cole** - August 09, 2019 at 08:42 AM

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“ Lynne, Ashley and Michael, you are in my thoughts and prayers. George was a wonderful husband, father and friend. I often celebrated his accomplishments in conservation that I would read or hear about over the years. I am out of town and am sorry that I was unable to attend his memorial service. I hope to see you soon Lynne for some sharing of our grand baby stories. God bless George and his work for the State of Florida that gives our children and grandchildren protected lands to enjoy as we have. Margaret Worrell

**Margaret K Worrell** - August 08, 2019 at 09:36 PM

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“ I had the distinct honor and pleasure to work with George Willson in the conservation field over 20 years and to enjoy his friendship while working together. George was a consummate professional, a tireless and passionate worker and advocate for conservation throughout his career. His conservation legacy and voice will long be remembered and his voice, leadership, and expertise will be sorely missed.

Florida's citizens, visitors and communities benefited immeasurably through the many successful conservation projects that George worked so hard to preserve. Most importantly, so much of Florida's waters, wildlife habitats, and overall environment will continue to be conserved and protected because of the work that he and his many colleagues endeavored and persevered to accomplish.

Unfortunately, my wife and I were out of town and unable to attend his memorial service. My deepest sympathies and condolences go out to all of his family.

Most Sadly and Sincerely,

Gary Cochran

**Gary Cochran** - August 08, 2019 at 08:56 PM

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“ I've known George professionally since the late '80's when we worked on two sides of land conservation in Florida: he in real estate and me in plant ecology for the FL Natural Areas Inventory. At first I had him pinned as another "suit", but he surprised me twice. Once when he sent some photos of the Big Bend coastal project with a picture of a helicopter on a salt flat that he used to get to the less accessible parts and, upon being asked, mentioned he had been in the marines. The second time was when he became a VP at St Joe Company and I suddenly had access to the Little Sandy Creek property and they had actually burned some of it, so I was able to tell how the "dark-headed hatpins" responded to fire (it's up 1 month later). I will miss him.

Ann Johnson

**Ann F. Johnson** - August 08, 2019 at 04:24 PM

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“ I first met George at the P-2000 state review of Fisheating Creek in Glades County in early 1998. After that time, we became friends as well as colleagues. He was not only a marvelous advocate for natural resources and land conservation, George also was avid about protecting and learning more about archaeological and historical sites—which I spent the bulk of my work life doing. He also loved Florida’s spring passionately and always wanted to know what the Woodville Karst Plain Project was up to. A few years back, I wanted George to join us on some visits to the wild springs on the SMNWR but it never worked out for us. I last went on a field visit with him to the Apalachicola River in August of 2017 for a Florida Forever assessment. He was kind enough to offer me a ride over there. Still, we corresponded regularly discussing and lamenting all sorts of topics and interests till the very end. Peace be with you my friend. You have touched and influenced so many lives in a positive way over your decades of service to conservation.

Mike Wisenbaker

Mike Wisenbaker - August 08, 2019 at 12:45 PM

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“ 1 file added to the album Memories Album



Mike Wisenbaker - August 08, 2019 at 11:59 AM



“ date should read August 2017

Mike Wisenbaker - August 08, 2019 at 12:00 PM

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“ The state should name one of the forests, parklands, or native preserves he helped acquire after George W. Willson.

My condolences to his family and many friends.

Terrell Arline

TERRELL ARLINE - August 08, 2019 at 11:16 AM

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“ It was a privilege to have known George. When I think of him I will always remember our rambles together along the high bluffs of the Apalachicola - one of the most beautiful places in Florida -- and one of the many which George worked hard to preserve for future generations of Floridians. What fun we had! George knew so much about the history of the river and its people. He had a vision of what could be, and a boundless optimism. One could not ask for a better companion for a walk in the woods.

Rob Williams

Tallahassee



**Rob Williams** - August 08, 2019 at 09:00 AM

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“ I've heard it said that the true measure of a person's life can be gauged by how much they improved the world while they were here. If that's true, then George Willson's life can only be described as an unqualified success. Years from now when all of us here today are gone, George's legacy, a legacy of green, will continue to shine and only become more precious to the people of Florida. Those of us who were lucky enough to work with him in making it happen won't see the likes of him again. I'm grateful to be one of those people.

Albert Gregory

Tallahassee

**Albert Gregory** - August 08, 2019 at 07:05 AM

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“ I have known George for many years and worked on many projects together. Some have always come to mind. George went to Governor and Cabinet and asked to purchase property on courthouse steps from the Resolution Trust Corp., in Walton County which they did and in Walton County that is now Point Washing State Forest. The other was when we were pursuing and acquisition that supported State Forest management, and George would get and support some of them. Many times he would be asked if it was a good deal, and George would always say it is a good deal, which was what they wanted to hear. The last time I saw George I was on one of my many bicycle rides through town and while climbing a hill in a subdivision and saw a person walking down the hill. I always wave to people, and I turned around and told him my name since nobody would recognize riders in bicycling outfits. We talked for quite a while about many different subjects. I am glad for that time together.

I and we all miss you and it has been a privilege to have known you. Your conservation legacy will live on.

**Steve Bohl** - August 08, 2019 at 02:47 AM

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“ A great man with a great heart. You'll be missed, George. Rest in Peace, fellow warrior.

**Scott Griffin** - August 07, 2019 at 03:43 PM

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“ George and I first met when both of us were state agency staff to the Conservation and Recreation Lands Acquisition Program. We spent four years together with other representatives reviewing, visiting, and helping assess some of Florida's finest properties that have become Parks, Water Protection Areas, Historic Sites, State Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas.

One of my favorite George stories involved a field inspection by all of the Agency staff of the Guana River Tract, which at that time was to become the most expensive (and highly prized) state land acquisition. As six of us were bouncing along AIA in my DNR Office Suburban, George spied a backhoe near the road plowing through some vegetated dunes on the beachfront. George rose up, shouted: "Stop this car!", and demanded that we go back and arrest the operator immediately, although none of us had law enforcement authority.

I turned the Sub around and pulled up to the backhoe, and George leaned out of the window and hollered "That's illegal!!" at the operator, who was so startled by the state vehicle and George that he jumped off the backhoe, which was still running, and took off down the road and disappeared into the palmetto scrub across the road. George then picked up the Park Service radio we had and tried to get the local Parks staff to apprehend the guy somehow. Eventually, we gave up on immediate arrest and George got in touch with Beaches and Coastal Systems staff to report the apparent violation.

It was an example of George's fierce love for the environment and protecting it whenever he could. As the years went by, he continued to show that commitment over and over, always with a smile and an positive attitude. Its a great legacy.

Thank you, George.

Ed Conklin

**Edwin Conklin** - August 07, 2019 at 09:47 AM

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“ George was truly a conservation hero, and he will be greatly missed. Preston Robertson

**Preston Robertson** - August 07, 2019 at 08:54 AM

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“ George helped MLC secure the land to the east in conservation easement and we often think of him when walking our eastern boundary. We were lucky to have he, Lynn, Ashley and Michael as close neighbors. Love to them and thanks to George. Orin and Mary Sadler

**mary sadler** - August 07, 2019 at 08:08 AM

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“ George was avid sometimes zealous advocate for conserving Florida’s natural resources. He was never lacking in energy or words to express his interests in the numerous land acquisitions that he was instrumental in bringing to completion. Many of Florida’s most significant sites were saved through his tireless efforts. I am sorry to hear of his passing. He will be missed but remembered by many and his legacy of lands he helped save will be enjoyed by all hopefully forever.  
Greg Brock

**Greg Brock** - August 06, 2019 at 07:23 PM

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“ George here are a few of my memories of a conservation champion he was a great friend .I met him spring of 1984 at Cedar Key working on what became the Warren Henderson Wetlands Act ,later George was a tiger defending Jumping Gulley Creek from phosphate mining expansion , he and Steve Gatewood introduced me to South Walton in what later became largely due to George stellar public lands . George was instrumental in both in many other conservation parcels connecting gems all across Florida and beyond into Georgia. He successfully worked on major private lands easement initiatives from the Kissimmee basin to the Panhandle. It was always a great pleasure bouncing along country roads and swamp tromping with George Big John Hankinson and Hilsenbeck and many other conservation and naturalist bright lights . He had a great sense of humor coupled with his vast knowledge and connections to people from all walks of life . You didn’t want to get crossways with George as he could be impressively fierce in making his points . I only did that once or twice but after a little while the bumps in the road were forgotten he smiled and he moved on to the next conservation opportunity . I and we all miss you terribly but are privileged to have known you . Best salutations to you and yours George. Manley

**Manley Fuller** - August 06, 2019 at 05:46 PM

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“ Gratitude and admiration for George, a politically and scientifically savvy and successful warrior for Florida's ecosystems, a loving husband and father, a caring friend. Deep condolences to Lynne, Ashley and Michael and family. <3

Deb Swim - August 06, 2019 at 04:44 PM

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“ George was a good friend and inspiration. He always was ready to share a great story about the land conservation projects and folks that made them happen. George was a visionary. I first worked with George when served on Governor Chiles' Florida Greenways Commission, and over the past 25 years admired his knowledge and ability to make land conservation projects work for the sellers and the buyers no matter for whom he was working. I'll miss tromping through the woods and talking about conservation opportunities with George. George had a hand in creating an incredible conservation legacy seeing more than 850,000 acres protected, an area large as the Ocala and Apalachicola National Forests combined. All Floridians should be thankful for his significant contributions to our state's natural heritage. I'll miss Florida's conservation sage.

Kent Wimmer, Defenders of Wildlife and Florida Trail Association



Kent L. Wimmer - August 06, 2019 at 04:12 PM

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“ I hadn't seen George in a few years, maybe more than a few. When George worked at DNR, DEP, and The Nature Conservancy, I worked for the Florida Department of State, for many years as the director of the Division of Historical Resources. Before that, when George and I were both much younger, in the mid to late 70s, I was staff person for the division representative to the Environmentally Endangered Lands Program. I met George then and was the beneficiary of his good advice on many land conservation topics. We knew each other professionally from about 1974 or 1975, I think, through several iterations of the state land acquisition program, lobbying conservation and preservation legislation, and in meetings developing state land conservation plans. I retired from the state in 2000. I've thought of him often since then, along with some of the others I grew up with in state government and in the context of Florida land conservation efforts. To me George and these others have always represented the kind of professionalism and dedication I associate with state government in Florida. Almost nothing is forever, but even through all the years Florida added a thousand new people a day and rapid development threatened many beautiful areas of the state, George was one of those who helped slow the rate, preserving the character of Florida and avoiding too much future shock for the rest of us. I respected George greatly for his knowledge, commitment, and honesty.  
George Percy

**George Percy** - August 06, 2019 at 03:10 PM

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“ Our love and hugs to Lynne, Ashley and Michael. We loved having you as neighbors and friends in the MLC so long ago. -Judith and Tom Lyons

**Judith Lyons** - August 06, 2019 at 12:54 PM

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**Jeremiah Thompson** - August 06, 2019 at 12:19 PM



“ It was a rather cool morning on the Apalachicola River, but we still had a great time out there. Full of insight, George pointed out many historical spots along the river. We even stopped at a place where Andrew Jackson crossed and had a good laugh around a very old oak tree. George was a blast to be around and his knowledge and passion for conservation has been inspiring to all. I feel truly blessed to have met such a genuine and honest man, even more so that we became friends. Thank you for all you have done. We'll keep fighting the good fight to protect the lands we love.

**Jeremiah Thompson** - August 06, 2019 at 12:36 PM



“ George was a great guy who probably did as much for Florida's environmental protection as anyone in the state's history. We will miss his energy and drive.

Mike Sheridan

**mike sheridan** - August 06, 2019 at 06:11 PM

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“ Thank heavens we had George on our side. He was a true conservation warrior, and Florida is a much better place for it because of his tremendous efforts to save so many critical natural areas. Even when I visited him recently, he was still upbeat and working, which is how I'll certainly remember him. Thank you, George, for all you did and for your friendship, and for the myriad photos and articles about reptiles and amphibians that you shared with me. Dale Jackson, FL Natural Areas Inventory and your subdivision neighbor

**Dale Jackson** - August 06, 2019 at 09:05 AM

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“ I had the privilege of working with George when he was with The Nature Conservancy, I had the honor of being his friend. He was a giant in land conservation in Florida and has left an irreplaceable legacy. More than that he was honest, honorable and fun! I will miss him in many ways, including bantering about our FSU-UF rivalry. So long, old friend. 🙏

**Pat Harden** - August 05, 2019 at 04:12 PM

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“ God has received a truly good man. George was intellectually gifted beyond most of us and he used those gifts to better the world he knew and within which he lived. It has been my great privilege to know and work with George for twenty -five years through our association at Tall Timbers Research Station. I learned a lot from him every time I was with him. All of us at Tall Timbers have lost a valuable member of our Board and the incredible assets and resources of the environment of Florida and the Red Hills of North Florida and South Georgia have as well. Good bye for now, George. God bless and keep Lynne and your family in the days ahead.  
Rosamond C Davis

Rosamond Chubb Davis - August 05, 2019 at 03:00 PM

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“ I have always said that I wish I could read a friend’s obituary when I first meet them instead of when their work is done and they have gone to heaven because it would be so interesting to hear details of their accomplishments.  
This is particularly true of George. I have so many questions I would like to ask him about his massive conservation successes !  
I first met him decades ago when he was part of Tall Timbers Consortium, a group of heads of various Conservation organisations that got together at Tall Timbers to be a sort of think tank.  
His quiet, concise, intelligent manner of adding valuable input to every situation has been his strong suit, particularly as a treasured member of the Easement Review Committee at Tall Timbers, of which I am Chair.  
His experienced , savvy outlook often resulted in an addition to or deletion from Easement documents resulting in a balance of protection, consumptive use of renewable resources and land owner rights.  
I will miss him personally and professionally !  
Daphne Flowers Wood  
Live Oak and Merrily Plantations  
Monticello Florida

Daphne Wood - August 05, 2019 at 01:21 PM