

THE UNKNOWN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

T O M



LYLE  
LEVERICH

"A huge accomplishment . . . thorough and passionate, an astonishing tale."

—John Lahr, *The New Yorker*

# TOM

*The Unknown Tennessee Williams*

Lyle Leverich



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*For Tennessee,  
who asked me to report,  
in truth,  
his cause aright.*

# GENEALOGY OF Tennessee Williams



**Dakin**

Brothers from  
Hamburg, Germany  
immigrated  
1857 1863

William  
Otte

Frank Henry  
Otte  
m.  
Elizabeth  
von Albertzart

Estelle, Clemence,  
and Frank  
Otte



**Lanier**

Orig. Daykin  
Norman-English,  
1066

Timothy Dakin  
b. 1723  
A Quaker from NY  
m.  
Lydia Fish  
b. 1725

Preserved Fish  
Dakin  
1749-1835  
m.  
Deborah Akin  
1755-1804

James Dakin  
1790-1857  
Judge of  
Common Pleas  
m.  
Mary Ann  
Sabin

Dr. Edwin  
Francis  
Dakin  
1819-1892  
m.  
Hannah Bellar  
1825-1886

The Rev. Walter  
Edwin Dakin  
1857-1954  
m.  
Rosina

Maria Francesca  
von Albertzart-  
Otte ("Grand")  
1863-1944

John Lanier,  
French Huguenot,  
immigrated to England,  
and to the USA in  
1658

Half-brothers

Sampson Lanier  
m.  
Elizabeth  
Washington

James Lanier  
c. 1724-1786  
m.  
Mary Cooke  
d. 1774

Sampson  
Lanier II  
1770-1823  
m.  
Elizabeth  
Massey  
1770-1834

Sterling Lanier  
1794-1870  
m.  
Sarah Fulwood  
1803-1868

Robert Sampson  
Lanier  
1819-1893  
of Macon, Georgia  
m.  
Mary Jane  
Anderson  
1822-1865

Sidney Clopton  
Lanier  
1842-1881  
"America's Sweet  
Singer of Songs"

The Williamses came of  
an ancient Welsh  
family of Langallen

John and Mary  
Williams  
from Wales  
in 1738

Nathaniel  
Williams  
Hanover County,  
Va



**Williams**

Col. Joseph "Duke of  
Surrey" Williams  
1748-1827  
m.  
Rebekah Lanier  
1757-1832

John Williams  
1745-1799  
m.  
Elizabeth  
Williamson

"Prince John" Williams,  
1778-1837  
U.S. Senator and  
Minister to Guatemala  
m.  
Melinda White  
1789-1838

Thomas Lanier  
Williams I  
1786-1856  
Senator, Judge  
m.  
Polly L. McClung

Col. John  
Williams II  
1818-1881  
m.  
Rhoda Campbell  
Morgan  
1819-1867

Margaret  
Williams  
m.  
Richard Pearson  
Chief Justice,  
North Carolina

Thomas Lanier  
Williams II  
1849-1908  
Tennessee  
Commissioner  
of Railroads  
m.  
Isabella Coffin  
1853-1884

John Williams III  
1847-1933  
m.  
Lizzie Nelson  
1852-1885  
m.  
Mary Williams  
m.  
David Meriwether

Ella Williams  
1875-1958

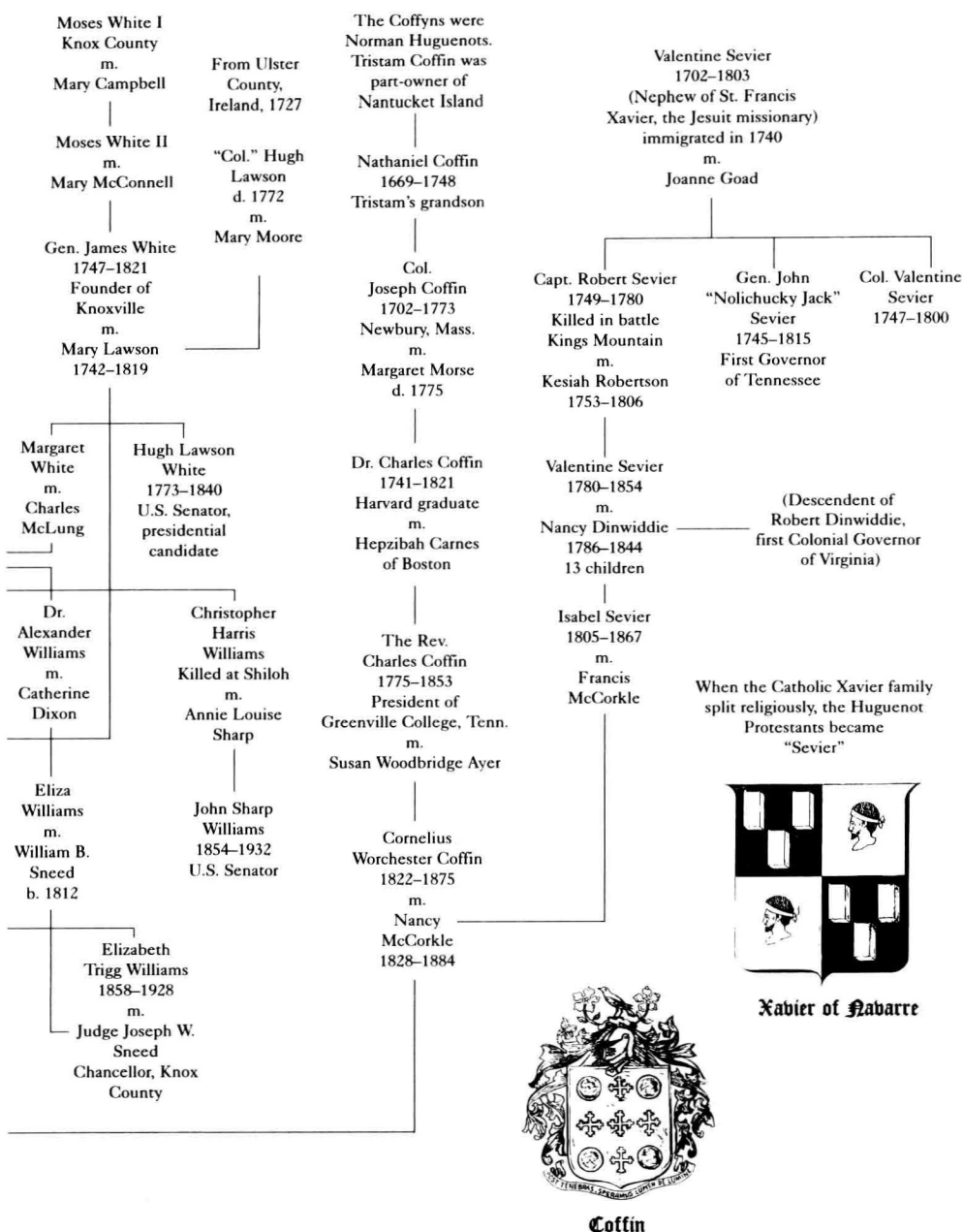
Cornelius Coffin  
Williams  
1879-1957  
m.  
Edwina Estelle  
Dakin  
1884-1980

Isabel Williams  
1883-1938  
m.  
William G. Brownlow II  
(Grandson of William  
"Parson" Gannaway  
Brownlow,  
Gov. of Tennessee,  
1885)

Rose Isabel  
Williams  
1909-

Thomas Lanier Williams III  
"TENNESSEE"  
1911-1983

Walter Dakin  
Williams  
1919-  
m.  
Joyce Crost  
1921-



Tennessee Williams wrote that he was composed of “a little Welsh wildness, a lot of puritan English and a big chunk of German sentiment,” and that he had “a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses” he wrote about. His pedigree included one bona fide saint, Huguenots and Quakers persecuted for their religious beliefs, ruthless Indian fighters and militarists, a few madmen, and a string of politicians along with two American “first families”—the adventurous Seviars, who carved out the state of Tennessee, and the intellectual New England Coffins, one of whom was the poet Tristram Coffin. The Laniers stemmed from a line of Elizabethan court musicians that led to the poet Sidney Lanier. It was a heredity of which Williams was justly proud.

## *Notes to the Genealogy*

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While it is true that Tennessee Williams was descended from ancestors who were distinguished in the history and founding of the state of Tennessee, the facts were somewhat confused and often dramatized by the dramatist. Nevertheless, as Steve Cotham, Librarian of the McClung Historical Collection in Knoxville, says, "In investigating his ancestry, I find that Tennessee Williams is connected in multiple ways to many of the leading families of East Tennessee, especially the McClungs, the Whites, and the Coffins. Through the intricate web of intermarriages of these families, he is nominally related to an even wider circle of the leading families of the state and region." [Cotham to LL, letter dated 18 June 1985]

Col. Joseph Williams (1748–1827) and Rebekah Lanier (1757–1832) were married in 1772 and settled at Panther Creek in Surry County, North Carolina. He was a colonel in the Colonial Army, but when war was declared against Great Britain, he resigned his commission and became a colonel in the Continental Army. Her family were French Huguenots who left France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. (In 1963, the Oxford historian A. L. Rowse uncovered evidence that he felt identified Shakespeare's "Dark Lady of the Sonnets" as Emilia Bassano Lanier, the wife of a court musician, who was, Rowse claimed, an ancestor of Tennessee Williams.)

Among Joseph and Rebekah's ten children, Thomas Lanier Williams (born 1786) became an early state senator, judge, and chancellor, a legal office of the East Tennessee district. His brother, John Williams (1778–1837), fought in the War of 1812 but not, as Tennessee Williams believed, at King's Mountain, a battle that took place during the American Revolution. John was a United States senator in 1815. He married Melinda White (1789–1837), daughter of Gen. James White (1747–1821), a pioneer and frontiersman and the founder of Knoxville; their son, John, Jr. (1818–1881), became the father of the second Thomas Lanier Williams (1849–1908), whose wife was Isabella ("Belle") Coffin (1853–1884), daughter of Nancy and Cornelius C. Coffin.

Isabella, Tennessee Williams's paternal grandmother, was descended from Valentine Sevier (Xavier), who came to America about 1740 and among whose children were Gen. John ("Nolichucky Jack") Sevier (1745–1815); Col. Valentine Sevier (1747–1800); and Capt. Robert Sevier (1749–1780), who was killed at King's Mountain.

Cornelius Coffin Williams's descent is traced in the family Bible of Ella Williams, his sister, and in her records taken from Historical Families of Tennessee, Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville. Williams, White, Sevier, and Coffin biographies are from *The French Broad-Holston Country: A History of Knox County, Tennessee*, Mary Rothrock, ed. (Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1946. No. 58, "Tennessee Williams's Family Books," in Special Collections, Washington University Library, St. Louis.) See also Dr. William J. MacArthur, Jr., "Knoxville: Crossroads of the New South,

1890–1918” (McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Library System.)

Robert Sevier also had a son named Valentine (1780–1854), who became a railroad commissioner. His granddaughter, Nancy, married Cornelius C. Coffin, whose daughter, Isabel, married Tennessee Williams’s grandfather, Thomas Lanier Williams, also a railroad commissioner. (It should be noted that Gen. John Sevier, who at one time resided along the Nolichucky River—hence his nickname—was a famed Indian fighter who led 240 men across the Smokies to a decisive victory over the British at King’s Mountain and who became the first governor of Tennessee. He did not fight a duel with Andrew Jackson, as legend has it, although theirs became a celebrated feud. Tennessee Williams took pride in being descended from the Seviers and often referred to their fighting spirit as a characteristic of the Williams line.)

Genealogies have traced the Seviers to the Xaviers in the kingdom of Navarre, one of whom became a ward of the Bourbon monarch. Subsequently the family was divided religiously. At the time of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, the Roman Catholics kept the name of Xavier while the other side, the Huguenot Protestants, changed theirs to Sevier and fled to England. The original Valentine Xavier was a Basque and brother of Saint Francis Xavier. The fact that the great Jesuit missionary was evidently an ancestor did not especially impress the Protestant wing of the family, although Tennessee Williams allowed that possibly he was related and that this was “the family’s nearest claim to world renown.” (See “Sevier Family History” by Cora Bales Sevier & Nancy Madden, 1961, pp. 13, 418, 437, 441–442.)

The spelling of Daykin was an adaptation of the Norman-English “Dakyn” as it appears on the family coat of arms. As far as the genealogy has been traced, the first American Dakin lived in Concord, Massachusetts, before 1650, after which members of the family moved to New York State. During the American Revolution, a branch of the family emigrated to Canada as Tories, or King’s Loyalists, and settled in Digby, Nova Scotia.

William Otte was born in Hanover and sailed to America in 1857. He first lived in Cincinnati and after that in Richmond, Indiana, finally settling in Marysville, where in 1871 he and his brother began a family business that continued until 1976. (See *Marysville Journal-Tribune*, 2 July 1976, p. 1.)

Edwina Dakin Williams maintained that a relative, Elijah Sabin, was disqualified as acceptable lineage because he was a Quaker and would not have fought in the Revolution. While it is true that Quakers did not take up arms, the DAR ruled that, if they had furnished food and other comfort to the Colonial Army, they qualified as proper reference. Sabin is in fact in the DAR lineage books.



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Herman Arrow, the closest and most loyal of friends, was the first to insist that I meet with Tennessee to propose a book about the playwright in the theatre. A first-rate photographer, Herm provided not only impetus but superb photographs of Tennessee.

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Andreas Brown, Tennessee's bibliographer and archivist and proprietor of New York's famed Gotham Book Mart, met with me in 1979 when Tennessee

asked him to give me his full cooperation. As critic and catalyst, he has been of inestimable help in continuing the tradition of the Gotham's founder, Frances Steloff. He has given generously of himself as a friend, opening the way for me to many who knew and worked with Tennessee Williams, for which I will always be grateful.

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Dakin Williams generously gave me access to his family's photographs and papers and the exclusive right to quote from them, and met with me for many hours of interviews in St. Louis and New York. As Tennessee's "kid brother," Dakin had the firsthand experience of growing up under the same parental roof, and his recollections lent important authentication.

I must also include among this hierarchy those friends and associates who have my gratitude for their valuable and kind contributions:

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Although I should stress that this is not an estate "authorized" biography, I was gratified to learn in November 1994 that trustee John Eastman and the estate's attorney, Michael Remer, had kindly cleared the way for publication.

I must add a caveat: that no biographer should ever paddle his way through the perilous seas of the publishing world without the enlightening direction of counsel, and I am most beholden unto my attorney R. Stephen Goldstein, with special thanks to his assistant Gwen Dangerfield, and to Gale Elston and Lana Halliday for their invaluable legal assistance.

*The Shattered Mirror:*  
*Origins of a Biography*

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In January of 1976, Tennessee Williams was in San Francisco to attend the final rehearsals of his new play, *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*. At a press conference held prior to a highly publicized opening sponsored by the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), I spoke to Tennessee's agent, Bill Barnes, concerning a possible production of one of the playwright's later plays, *Out Cry*. Barnes said that Tennessee had revised and renamed it *The Two-Character Play*, its original 1967 title, and that he would mail the galleys as soon as he returned to New York.

Instead of an experimental tryout, *THIS IS* was given an extravagant New York-style premiere and received devastating reviews. Subsequently, Tennessee came to the theatre I managed, The Showcase, and we made plans for an opening in October of *The Two-Character Play*, which I proposed to produce in tandem with *The Glass Menagerie*. Although he was preoccupied with various other productions in Los Angeles, New York, and Vienna, Tennessee made three transcontinental trips back to San Francisco to supervise the direction and casting of a play that he described to the producer as being probably the most difficult he had ever written, "the interior landscape of the most terrible period of my life." He chose the director and worked with the actors, Fred Ward and Patricia Boyette. He came to the opening night and sat with venerable actress Ina Claire, and he was pleased at the audience's reception. Although as *Out Cry* the play had been poorly reviewed in New York, as *The Two-Character Play* it received respectable notices in San Francisco from the same critics who had rejected *THIS IS*, and he left in a cheerful frame of mind. I had made a friend.

During the next two years, Tennessee and I would meet when he came to the West Coast or when we both happened to be in New York. We would

often go to a film (for him a lifelong escape) or have dinner together. In San Francisco, I remember the enjoyment he had in cooking grits and bacon as his contribution to a potluck supper at the home of an actress friend of mine, Olwen Morgan, who had played Amanda to acclaim in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Whenever Tennessee and I were alone, he would frequently talk about incidents in his life or aspects of his career. Although I was not then entertaining the notion of anything so romantic as becoming a Boswell to his Johnson, I was impelled to write a criticism of Robert Brustein's review of *Tennessee Williams' Letters to Donald Windham* as being factually inaccurate and critically gratuitous. In a letter dated December 11, 1977, Tennessee asserted, "No one has ever written a more powerful and eloquent defense of my work and character." His conclusion that it was "so marvelously good" inspired me to go on writing about him.

In January 1978 in Atlanta, over dinner with Tennessee, I said that I felt *Memoirs* had done him a disservice, if only because it failed to reflect his stature as a man of the theatre, the person I knew and worked with. I said that there should really be a publication about Tennessee Williams at work in the theatre, and he said, "Baby, you write it!" When at lunch the next day Bill Barnes offered to handle the book, I returned to my home and devoted the next few months to writing a biographical section, meant to *precede* the viewpoints of Tennessee's theatre associates as they saw and worked with him in the production of his plays. That seemed a formidable enough task, and I would have been quite content to let it go at that.

Bill quickly found a publisher for the work, and Tennessee read the first drafts. However, on the basis of that initial effort, he decided that I should write a full biography and chose to announce this on the night of the 1979 Kennedy Center Honors award when he introduced me to his brother, Dakin, as his "authorized biographer." Because the publisher subsequently decided that it did not want an authorized biography, Tennessee gave me a letter of authorization, urging me to find another publisher so that we could continue to work together.

During the final months before he died, when I saw him in New Orleans and when he called from Key West, Tennessee asked me pointedly about my progress toward completion of the book. The biography had taken on a sudden urgency in his view, and I reassured him repeatedly that I was keeping my end of our agreement. Despite several years of research and numerous interviews with him and those friends and associates he singled out, as well as the writing of initial drafts, I confided to a friend that I found writing the biography of someone as sensitive and volatile as Tennessee Williams not a little like performing an autopsy on a living person. I told Tennessee that I was concerned about writing truthfully and reporting divergent views of his character, and he remarked, "You can always say that the ol' hound dog could be a son of a bitch and not shoot wide of the mark!"

Bill Barnes told me how hesitant he had been to take on Tennessee as a



client, having heard how difficult and demanding he could be. Add to that the onus of his succeeding Audrey Wood, Tennessee's agent for over thirty-two years. Both Bill and the dauntless Miss Wood were employed at International Famous Agency, later ICM (International Creative Management). She and Tennessee had parted company acrimoniously in the summer of 1971 when he accused her of no longer caring about his career, of being interested not in his new plays but only those with commercial potential. It was a tragic ending to an extraordinarily close and productive association. Barnes, a young and handsome southerner, "charming Billy," as his friends called him, first met with his mercurial client at New York's popular St. Regis hotel bar, where Tennessee told him that, having somehow survived his decline both professionally and physically during the sixties, he wanted once again to see his name up in lights on Broadway. After Audrey assured Bill she would guide him through the shoals, he gave seven years of hard labor to the task of being, as Tennessee insisted, his "representative," not his agent.

In my conversations with him, Tennessee readily admitted that he was given to paranoid rages, often out of foundless suspicions, that were as quick to flare as they were to subside, and he was concerned that many of his actions would be misconstrued after his death and exploited unfairly. Since then, it has become apparent to me that he wanted to choose his own biographer during his lifetime for evidently much the same reason his friend Gore Vidal has chosen his. The truth is that Tennessee saw his own faults more clearly than did any of his detractors. Normally, he was gentle with those who were gentle toward him, but he was all too painfully conscious of what evidence could be turned against him if his biographers were to dwell mainly on his peccadilloes, addictions, and "failed promise." He apparently felt that I would not, at one extreme, indulge in the hagiography his idolaters would like, nor, at the other extreme, exploit him personally at the expense of his place as an artist.

On the day he left New Orleans for the last time, he phoned me at a theatre where I was working to ask if I had delved into his archives at the University of Texas in Austin. I said, yes I had, the previous year, but not as extensively as I would have liked. He asked me about my progress on the biography, adding that en route to the airport he would drop off a letter for me. This second authorization, dated January 25, 1983, gave me "full access" to his papers, journals, and correspondence. One month later to the day, I received a phone call from Bill Barnes giving me the terrible news of Tennessee's death. His letter was still open on my desk. I could only look upon it as his mandate to continue our work, and I left immediately for New York to give the biography my full attention.

As Tennessee Williams's chosen biographer and as a theatre person writing about a theatre genius, I have been quite naturally drawn to what was dramatic in his life and what in his character determined his becoming a pre-eminent American playwright. He not only wrote of *dramatis personae*, he