

History of Willy Franz Stolle

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Author's note: This history will continue to be updated as additional information becomes available.

Willy Stolle was born March 24, 1895, in Scholitz, the legitimate son of the laborer Friedrich Stolle and his wife Emma Lander. Willy was baptized May 9, 1895, in the Evangelical Church at Pütnitz in the presence of three godparents.

We don't know much about his early life other than he grew up on a farm. We believe Willy was a boxer in his early years. He fought in WWI. He was captured as a prisoner of war, and interred on the United Kingdom Isle of Mann in the Knockaloe Internment Camp. After WWI he was released, and apparently returned to his native Germany.

At some point he went to work in a shipyard, probably in Bremerhaven, as a carpenter. While there he met Eric Wilkens and became lifelong friends. At some point Eric joined the Dutch Merchant Marines and spent some years at sea.

While Eric stayed at sea Willy returned to Germany. He worked as a laborer, possibly as a mason and general construction. He married the former Anna Sackenwitz on 20 February 1920. They had a son in 1920, but the child died shortly after birth after being baptized. They never had another child.

At some point in the early 1920s Willy and his wife emigrated to the United States and settled in New York City. One day Willy was walking down a street and met up with his friend Eric Wilkens. The two men had literally been living around the corner from each for the previous two years.

Willy worked as a carpenter in New York, and his projects included renovating Manhattan "Brownstone Houses." These town homes were once city homes for wealthy business people, but by the 1920s were being converted into apartment buildings. Willy was able to salvage some number of fittings and wood trim from these buildings and then used in his own building projects. He may have also resold some salvaged materials as a side business.

In 1927, Willy and Anna became Godparents to Eric and Martha's daughter Martha. The families remained close as Martha was growing up, and Anna became as close as a second mother to Martha.

About 1930 Willy purchased a piece of land in Brooklyn and built a home. His project was a brick wood framed two-story house with full basement. Willy was a meticulous carpenter and anything he built, he built to last.

(Note: Sometime during the late 1950s the city condemned the land the house was sitting on for road construction. Rather than letting the house be torn down, the owners had the house relocated. We do not know where the house was moved to.)

About 1941 Willy purchased 74 acres of land in the Hudson Valley area of New York State, nestled between the Catskill Mountains, in the town of Burlingham, Mamakating Township. This property was

farmland with some wooded acreage, but the original farmhouse (believed to have been built in the 1860s) burned down before the land was put up for sale. At the time Willy purchased the land, property improvements were limited to the rock and concrete foundation of the original house, a hand-pump water well, an outhouse, and a small hay barn located within 100 feet of the former house.

He put up his Brooklyn house for sale, and he and Anna moved to his Burlingham property. Anna did not want to leave New York City for life in rural New York, and her friends (including Eric Wilken's wife) tried to convince her to refuse to agree to a sale of their house. But Anna ultimately allowed Willy to sell.

Willy converted the barn into a cottage for him and Anna and slowly built his new house. While building this house he also continued to work as a carpenter in New York City and tried to turn his land into income opportunities. These projects included:

- Growing corn, which at the time was a big cash crop for the Hudson Valley region, used for cattle feed and for making whiskey. The Hudson Valley area was a major dairy-producing region, and corn was an important feed-stock for milk cattle. Whiskey was also a popular product of this farming region, as farmers could convert their corn to whiskey and sell it for a good price in New York City, with lower shipping costs than corn.
- There was a stream running through the property and Willy built an earthen damn across it, creating a shallow pond covering about two square acres. During this era, summer vacation cottages and summer camps were popular with people from New York City. The area around Burlingham saw many vacation cottage communities and summer camps. Willy planned to build vacation cottages around the pond and create another vacation cottage community. But shortly after the pond was built, before vegetation could grow and stabilize the damn, heavy rains washed out the damn. Willy never rebuilt it.
- Willy purchased a multi-function timber cutting-machine that had attachments for a lumber mill and for cutting firewood. He built a small shed for the lumber mill attachments and milled some of his own lumber. He may have used some of his own lumber for building his home. We believe he had at least some of his land logged for timber sales.
- Willy built a large and substantial chicken coop with concrete floor, and together with Anna they raised chickens. At least for one year he also raised turkeys and sheep.
- Willy planted a grove of pine trees on the eastern side of the meadow, at the edge of the hardwood forest. We don't know whether these pines were intended for future lumber or as a windbreak for the field west of the pines.

Some of the salvaged materials from New York City Brownstones found their way into Willy's new house, including dark oak paneling and doors. As with his first home, his carpentry was meticulous and solid. One of his friends once jokingly asked Willy "how long he planned to live?" Presumably because of his carpentry and the length of time it was taking him to build the house.

At some point Willy and Anna were able to move into the house and out of the hay barn-converted cottage. By 1951 Willy was still working on finishing the second floor (attic space) of his house. One day while out driving in his Ford Model "T" pickup truck, he had a serious motor vehicle accident. He was in the hospital for about five days and died on mm/dd/1951. He was buried in New Prospect

Cemetery, outside of the town of Pinebush, New York, several miles from his farmhouse. He was survived only by his wife Anna.

Information sourced from Martha Charest (oral history), Ronald Charest (oral history), Melinda [Charest] Fodor (oral history) original documents, and headstone.