

## HISTORY OF THE BURRIS FAMILY REUNION

### **I. WASHINGTON, DC**

The First Burris Family Reunion came about as a result of a critical need for family members to know our history. Many attempts were made a year or so before the reunion was initiated. Esther Gibson, Jessie Fisher and Bruce Burris were initiators of the idea. The rest of the Wilson Burris children (Reverend Homer Burris, Carroll Burris, Inez Johnson, and Naomi Whitehurst) supported the idea.

In **August 1972**, at the home of Esther Gibson, 318 Sixteenth Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003, the reunion took place on a beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon. The program opened with an eloquent prayer by Carroll Burris followed by the history of the Burris Family by Ray Burris. Speeches were made by Jessie Fisher, Reverend Homer Burris, and Bruce Burris. Other family members shared greetings and expressions. Those in attendance were:

#### **Children of James Wilson and Lucy Ann Johnson:**

Reverend Homer and Adele Burris, Aiken, SC  
Jessie Fisher, North Chicago, IL  
Ruth Ray, East Orange, NJ  
Esther Gibson, Washington, DC  
Bruce and Citeria Burris, Washington, DC  
Carroll and Eura Burris, Washington, DC  
Inez Johnson, Philadelphia, PA  
Naomi Whitehurst, East Orange, NJ



#### **Grandchildren and Great Grandchildren of Wilson & Lucy Burris in attendance:**

Ray and Leota Burris: Maresa and Ronald Burris, Silver Spring, MD  
James and Albertsina Gibson, Lorton, VA  
Deloris and Johnny McCarter, Vivian, Cynthia,  
John and Deloris McCarter, Washington, DC  
Octavia and Roland Hayes: India, Ruth, Rose Mary, and  
Roland Hayes, Jr., East Orange, NJ  
Henry Burris: Lucretia and Eric Burris, Washington, DC  
Girard Burris, Washington, DC  
Howard Johnson, Philadelphia, PA  
Alice Whitehurst, East Orange, NJ  
Melva Reid, a friend of the family, Washington, DC

### **II. NORTH CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**November 1973.** The second Burris Family Reunion met at the house of Jessie Bell and Robert Fisher, 2211 Kristen Avenue, North Chicago, IL. There were 11 family members in attendance, who sat around laughing, and chatting at the unique little dinner party. Jessie was an elegant hostess and fantastic cook!

### **III. NORTH CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**September 1977.** While seated in the First Baptist Church dining room, a discussion occurred to determine how to keep the family united. There in the home church of Jessie Bell Fisher, who was considered to be the “Mother Hen” of the family, seeds began to germinate that would eventually impact more than seven generations of Nero and Angeline Burris descendants. It was decided by James Gibson, Octavia Hayes, Lucy Salley, to keep the family united by having our first big family gathering at the home of James Wilson Burris in Aiken, SC. The descendants of Nero and Angeline held their first banquet dinner, a large family gathering, on the weekend of July 4, 1978 (Saturday), at the Holiday Inn, Aiken, SC, the family’s hometown. Loretta Gaskin presided, and addressed approximately 75 family members who attended. Arthur James and Lottie Gunther were the oldest members who attended. Roddie Burris, III obtained a large portion of the family history from Ocean Grove Baptist Church Records and from the church cemetery.

### **IV. EAST ORANGE, NEW JERSEY**

**July 1983.** At the home of Roland and Octavia Hayes, 73 Woodlawn Avenue, East Orange, NJ, 50 family members congregated at the artistry Burris family backyard brunch. A short play by James Wilson and Lucy Ann was performed by family members, who simulated the raising of their children and concluded with India Ruth and Mary playing the guitar. Shelia Salley prepared an oil painting of the family tree and prepared the first family history book. The attendees decided that the next reunion would be in the Washington, DC area, three years later. The reunion expanded from James Wilson Burris' family to all of Nero and Angeline's descendants.

### **V. WASHINGTON, DC**

**July 1985.** Seventy-five family members celebrated a magnificent three-day Fourth of July weekend in the Washington, DC area. After the banquet dinner, a business meeting was held in which the attendees accomplished many goals. The Burris Family Reunion was given the official name and incorporated; the Family Banner and Family Crest were decided upon as the family symbols. The reunion concluded on the Monday with a wonderful bus tour of Washington, DC.

### **VI. AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA**

**July 1988.** Another three-day weekend celebration of the Burris Family Reunion was held in Aiken, SC. On that Saturday, 175 family members attended an elegant banquet luncheon at the Odell Weeks Center. Sunday morning family members attended and old fashion down home revival at Ocean Grove Baptist Church. The afternoon concluded with a pot luck dinner at the home of Booker T. Burris. On Monday, the day began with a tour of Aiken County, the countryside of Beaver Dam Church Road, the Ocean Grove Schoolhouse and Cemetery, and Hayden Baptist Church. The reunion closed out with a glorious picnic on the grounds of Odell Weeks Center.

## **VII. NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**July 5-7, 1991.** Burriss family members met in New York City, NY at Days Inn. The theme was "Unity Strengthens Family Ties". On the first evening of the reunion, there was a boat ride around Manhattan Island. On the second day, family members gathered around the hotel pool for a social hour before the business meeting. The banquet celebration was held on the second evening with approximately 200 family members in attendance. After the banquet, many family members remained to enjoy a time of "disco dancing", a little "limbo" and "electric slide". The reunion closed with a Sunday morning continental prayer breakfast.

## **VIII. ATLANTA, GEORGIA**

**July 1-4, 1994.** Burriss family members met in Atlanta, GA. After a welcoming fellowship on the first evening, attendees joined in on a Karaoke session that was lots of fun, in addition to showcasing "hidden" talents! On the second day, family members gathered for a historical tour of Atlanta, which focused on important sites in the modern-day Civil Rights Movement. Later that evening, more than 250 Burriss and John & Sarah Johnson family members came together for a memorable banquet celebration of unity. The reunion concluded on Sunday morning with a business meeting followed by a short, but spirited worship service.

## **IX. OXON HILL, MARYLAND**

**July 4-6, 1997.** Burriss family members met in Oxon Hill, Maryland for a welcoming fellowship on the first evening. On the second day, there was a tour of Maryland or independent shopping and an elegant banquet. On the third day there was a continental breakfast and a business meeting. The reunion closed after the business meeting.

## **X. AUGUSTA, GEORGIA**

**July 14-16, 2000.** Burriss family members met in Augusta, GA, instead of Aiken, SC for the tenth reunion activity. The decision to relocate the reunion was the result of a national consensus of Burriss family members, who were polled about honoring the South Carolina NAACP's tourism boycott of the state. The purpose of the boycott was to force the State Legislature to remove the Confederate flag from atop the South Carolina capitol dome and inside the State House chambers. The overwhelming sentiment of South Carolinians and citizens from across America called for support of the NAACP's position. As of this printing in June 2000, the flag continued to fly above the capitol, although the legislature had passed a bill calling for its relocation to the State House grounds, in front of a Confederate soldier's monument. The Burriss Family Reunion 2000 (B2K) consisted of a Friday night welcoming pool party for the young people and games for others at the Radisson Suites Inn, in Augusta. Saturday activities included a bus tour of the "old home place" in the Ocean Grove – Hayden Church community, a tour of historic downtown Aiken, a visit to Crystal Waters Water Park, and a Family Banquet at Paine College (HBCU) in Augusta.

(Cont'd)

A late night Auction to raise seed money for the next reunion concluded a fun-filled day. The Family Business meeting was held on Sunday morning and was followed by Sunday worship at Ocean Grove Baptist Church, where the roots of our family tree were nurtured. More than 140 people were in attendance at **B2K**.

#### **XI. CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA**

Family members from Charlotte, NC hosted Burris Family Reunion, 2004. The reunion was convened **July 16, 2004** and was headquartered at the Charlotte Center City Marriott Hotel. The theme of the reunion was "Reflections Forward". The reunion committee chose this theme with the goal of inspiring family members to examine the dreams of our ancestors so that they might develop a new and empowered focus on the future. The reunion was initiated with a meet and greet in the hospitality suite on Friday afternoon. A pool party and a spades/bid whist tournament were sponsored on Friday evening. Saturday events included visits to Carowinds amusement park, a tour of the Museum of the New South (Levine Museum), a golf outing, independent shopping, a visit to the **IMAX** Theatre and was culminated with the reunion banquet. Family devotion and the business meeting were held on Sunday morning followed by worship at the location of choice. The 2004 Reunion was held during one of the most critical times in **OUR** nation's history with the war in Iraq, upcoming national elections in November and widespread social and political unrest as backdrops. Given these events, this reunion was themed and geared toward energizing the family's commitment and focus on our responsibility to be involved in the political process and self-determination.

#### **XII. PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA**

**2007 saw PHILADELPHIA, PA** as the site of the 12<sup>th</sup> Burris Family Reunion. The atmosphere of historic Philadelphia during the Independence Day weekend, and the reunion theme of 'Building on the Legacy', helped the family remember the country's roots and history, as well as their own. The program speaker, Deloris Queen Gibson McCarter, daughter of Esther Gibson, was one of the figures most influential in the family's incorporation, and was one of the originators of the tradition. ...And so the Burris Family Reunion, Inc continued... Activities included, Ride the Duck (a land/water tour of the city), a visit to Franklin Institute, the Liberty Bell/Liberty Hall tour, the "Philly Phlash" – a jitney-type trolley with on/off privileges for access to many central city attractions or to ride the whole loop for a Philadelphia tour. Some of the in house activities included a talent show, game night, review of the family tree, family gatherings and fellowship. The business meeting was scheduled on Saturday morning, and devotion was held on Sunday morning. The fun-filled weekend was ordained by India Hayes Larrier, Juanita Ray Habron, Mary Hayes McDaniel, and Octavia Ray Hayes.

### **XIII. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS CELEBRATING FAMILY –**

#### **Building Unity Remembering Relatives Inspiring Success**

Our family members in Chicago, Illinois, hosted the 13<sup>th</sup> Burris Family Reunion in Skokie, IL, on July 16-19, 2009, at the DoubleTree Hotel. The core committee consisted of Sandra Barrett Bankston, Evetta Burris Barrett, Melissa Barrett, Terrence Barrett, several advisors, and “huge helpers.” The weekend began with registration and socializing on Thursday evening. Friday featured a tour of Chicago, which included Hyde Park neighborhood, home of President Barack Obama. We enjoyed the sites of Skokie on Saturday, and concluded the evening with the reunion banquet. A farewell service and business meeting were held on Sunday, before departing our wonderful family members. The entire weekend was a beautiful reminder of '*Why Should We Have Family Reunions?*' Why? To remember where we came from. Examining the struggles and triumphs of our ancestors gives us the courage and fortitude to move forward knowing that because they overcame, so can we. Why Celebrate? To stay connected with the root from which we all began. Why Celebrate? Because it is the bond of family that sustains us. The world is ever-changing; life can be challenging---but family is forever. And within the family, an individual can find everything that is needed.

### **XIV. CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA**

#### **Theme: Living the Carolina Legacy**

The fourteenth Burris Family Reunion convened **July 6-8, 2012** at the Embassy Suites Historic Charleston. This city was chosen as the reunion site because of its unique historical connections with Aiken, SC and its rich African American culture. The South Carolina Burris Family Reunion Committee wanted the Burris Family to learn more about their family roots, by being exposed to the Gullah culture with its enduring African vestiges in the low country of our home state and in coastal Georgia. The weekend began with registration and a meet-and-greet session for mingling with family on Friday evening. Reunion souvenir booklets distributed with registration materials contained a 2012 updated Family Tree and History. Activities included games designed to stimulate our knowledge about the Nero and Angeline Burris family and videos highlighting Aiken and African American history of South Carolina. Events of the second day began with a Gullah Geechee Culture Black History Tour, followed by a short period of leisure time that could be used to briefly explore the city of Charleston. The Family traveled to James Island State Park that afternoon for a cook-out, socializing, games, and just plain fun at the Splash Zone Water Park. Day 2 was concluded with our traditional banquet, at the Embassy Suites hotel, followed by a virtual tour of Aiken, a night on the town, reminiscing through Friendly Family Feud Games, B12 at the Apollo and additional socializing. The reunion was concluded with a religious service and our business meeting on Sunday morning.

## **XV. SAVANNAH, GEORGIA**

### **Theme: Miles Apart, but Together in Love**

The fifteenth Burris Family Reunion was held Thursday through Sunday, **July 16-19, 2015**, at the Embassy Suites Historic Savannah. Like the low country of South Carolina, the culture of this elegant coastal city is a vibrant and living reminder of the richness of our heritage. Since there is no Burris household based in the host city of Savannah, the 2015 Planning Committee was composed of descendants from several branches living in at least ten different cities in the eastern and midwestern United States. Technology made it possible to function efficiently with a huge bonus of getting to know “cousins” living hundreds of miles apart. Truly, we were “*Miles Apart, but Together in Love.*” Consequently, one of the goals for this reunion was to actively engage everyone in getting to know as many new family members as possible, especially those from generations, branches, and cities other than their own. Toward this end, the “hospitality gang” provided several engaging and entertaining activities to encourage mingling, reminiscing, and lots of laughter: *Do you remember when?*, *Family Feud Game*, *Name Tag*, *The Game of Life*, *Scriptograms*, *Bananagrams*, *Phase 10 Twist*, *Pokeno*, *Men are from Mars – Women are from Venus*, *Yahtzee*, *Bible Blurt*, *Sum What Dice Game*, *Intergenerational Dancing with the Stars*, *Zumba*, and much more. In addition to table games, the four-day weekend included fun in sun at the Tybee Island Pavilion and Beach, walking and riding tours of the historic district of Savannah, and African/Gospel Dance. Many relatives also toured the First African Baptist Church, the oldest Black church in North America. The Saturday evening banquet was highlighted with white attire, a silent auction, an awesome a cappella trio from Burris generation seven, and engaging entertainment by the Abeni Cultural Performing Arts Dance Studio. The Ecumenical Service and business meeting completed the reunion on Sunday morning. In addition to the rejuvenating fellowship among weekend attendees, the Burris Family Reunion experienced several major accomplishments prior to the gathering: 1) Incorporation status has been restored; 2) Steps have been taken toward obtaining a copyright for the Burris Family Crest; and 3) The Archives Committee has begun to amass memorabilia from this fifteenth reunion, as well as those of the past. Registrations exceeded sixty individuals, representing thirty households and three of the six Burris Family Tree branches with descendants.



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