

SCOTT WILLIAMS

Compiled by Emily Adams Keplinger
Photo Provided by Scott Williams

Scott Williams is President and CEO of Discovery Park of America. He is also a former Memphian and a published author who has recently released his fourth book. Scott is dedicated to uncovering the forgotten stories of those who helped shape American history and popular culture. He is the author of biographies on adventurer Richard Halliburton, pioneering entertainment reporter Odd McIntyre and American folk hero David Crockett. In his latest work, "Townmania: Marcus Winchester and the Making of Memphis," he explores the life and times of early Memphis settler Marcus Winchester. The book also has ties to Germantown as Williams details how Winchester and his wife became close friends of Frances Wright,

"It was into this complicated world that Frances "Fanny" Wright rode into Memphis looking for land. Winchester showed her a few acres along the Wolf River near present-day Germantown. Standing among the autumn trees, she looked around and declared this was the place she would attempt to build something bold: a utopian community designed to end slavery. Marcus provided legal advice and helped manage some of the issues the community faced in the early days."

The book is available at Novel Memphis and on Amazon.

Here's a look between-the-lines at the background of this intriguing author..

Hometown: I am a seventh generation Tennessean, born in the old Baptist Memorial Hospital on Union Avenue in 1963. Both parents descended from a group of settlers who migrated to Haywood County, Tennessee, from Bertie County, North Carolina, in a wagon train led by my fourth great grandfather. My parents were among the first of those descendants to move to the big city of Memphis. They took me home from the hospital to their rental



on Spottswood, then soon purchased one of the first homes in a new subdivision named Parkway Village.

I grew up playing in the ditches where the Mall of Memphis would eventually stand. My family later moved to Eads, Tennessee, where we lived until moving to Texas for a short time. I returned to attend what was then Memphis State.

During that time, and after I married my wife Michelle, we lived in small homes around the university. We eventually purchased a lot in Midtown where the houses had been torn down in anticipation of construction of Interstate 40. Fortunately, that had been stopped years earlier, and we were able to build a house at the corner of Overton Park and Avalon, joining a very tight-knit community of Midtowners.

We later moved to Washington, D.C., but through the friendships we still have, Memphis and Midtown remain a part of our lives. In fact, my oldest daughter lives in Midtown today and is active in the entertainment and tourism sectors working for Memphis Presents.

Education and training: I was among the first groups of students to attend Briarcrest in elementary school and later attended the University of Memphis, where I graduated with

a degree in journalism. Much of my education, though, came outside the classroom at several iconic Memphis companies and organizations.

As a young delivery driver, I brought paper and supplies into the headquarters of Holiday Inn and spent as much time as I could observing those in the advertising and marketing department. At Cleo Gift Wrap, I learned the basics of visual communication and began putting those lessons to use under the direction of Memphis advertising professional Merritt Mosby.

Early in my career, I joined the team at Elvis Presley's Graceland, where I developed an interest in history and in presenting it in ways audiences could understand and appreciate. That perspective continued to grow during my time as chief operating officer of the Newseum in Washington, D.C., where working alongside accomplished journalists reinforced for me the importance of clarity, accuracy and the written word.

How did you get your start: After purchasing my first Mac in my mid-20s, it became clear that the intersection of history, technology and communication was only going to expand, and I wanted to be part of it. When Ancestry.com was first introduced, I began exploring genealogy and, largely out of curiosity, started a website and blog to

document what I was discovering and how I found it.

In time, a book publisher reached out after reading one of my posts about Memphis explorer Richard Halliburton and suggested I turn it into a book. I did, and they published it.

What was your AHA moment: While out of town and rushing to the airport, I picked up a copy of "The Hunt for Lincoln's Killer" by James L. Swanson. I read it on the airplane and through the night when I arrived home. As I closed that book, I knew I had found my calling. Swanson's approach showed me how archival and historic material could be presented in a cinematic structure while maintaining accuracy.

How did you find your niche and style: Through trial and error, I discovered the topics I most enjoy researching and the way I most enjoy writing. I research and write for pleasure, so the primary character needs to be someone I don't mind spending two or three years with. I want to research and write about historic individuals and moments in a way that draws in people who do not typically read books or watch documentaries about history. Along the way, I want to help them gain an appreciation for those who came before us. I am especially drawn to telling the stories of people who, for one reason or another, have been forgotten.

I am committed to producing work that is, to the best of my ability, thoroughly researched and factual. Beyond presenting the facts, I want readers to understand them in context and to experience, as fully as possible, what the subject of the work was living through at the time.

What and who has influenced your writing: In addition to James L. Swanson, I read everything written by Erik Larson and Candice Millard. I am also a fan of the work of the late Tony Horwitz. My bookshelves are filled with books about the history of Memphis and Tennessee and many aspects of Southern culture. Of course, my years of experience in entertainment and journalism color my impression of any subject.

What was your incentive to write your latest book: While researching David Crockett's first appearance in Memphis, I was introduced to Marcus Winchester. Many aspects of his life and family intrigued me, as did the fact that I had never encountered his name before despite the amount of reading I had done about Memphis history. I found myself wondering how someone so closely connected to my hometown's earliest days could seem to have faded from its collective memory.

That question stayed with me. It reinforced my belief that the people and places that shaped our communities deserve to be remembered. Their struggles, their virtues and their failures, their joy and their sorrow all form the foundation of who we are today. Historic places, in particular, should be preserved because they serve as tangible gateways to those lives, grounding memory in something we can see, touch and experience. Unfortunately, for Marcus Winchester, that did not happen. Hopefully, my book will help with that, even in a small way.

Titles of your books:

"The Forgotten Adventures of Richard Halliburton: A High-Flying Life from Tennessee to Timbuktu"

"An Odd Book: How the First Modern Pop Culture Reporter Conquered New York"

"The Accidental Fame and Lack of Fortune of West Tennessee's David Crockett"

"Townmania: Marcus Winchester and the Making of Memphis"

Who is your target audience:

As an old advertising guy, I have thought carefully about that. Those who enjoy my books tend to be educated readers who enjoy history but do not approach it from an academic perspective. I am writing for adults who read narrative nonfiction for pleasure, participate in book clubs, visit museums and historic sites and are interested in how the past continues to shape present identity. My readers would call themselves "lifelong learners." They value strong storytelling, but also demand careful research and factual integrity.

I aim for my books to be accessible without being simplistic and rigorous without being dense. I write for readers who want history to feel grounded in real lives, real places and real consequences rather than a long list of abstract dates and events. I want them to feel the book and the emotions behind the facts rather than simply read it.

Meet Scott at his book-signing event at NOVEL on April 9, at 6 p.m.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SCOTT WILLIAMS, VISIT HIS SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

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