As Williams welcomes a new “First Family” this year, it seems especially apropos to shed some light on the family who started it all. In the summer of 2007, music teacher Peter Emanuel used an Edward E. Ford Faculty Grant to pursue work on a project that had long interested him—researching the history of Williams’ first family.

Sifting through New London and Norwich Historical Society archives, libraries, church records, probate records, cemeteries, and newspaper accounts, researcher Peter Emanuel spent a good deal of time in little back rooms with heavy, leather-bound books. Pouring over handwritten books of property records, including values and inventories, he was awestruck not only by the details but by the tangible connection with people long gone. His research finds, that while the Williams were among the most notable citizens of southeastern Connecticut, they didn’t call attention to themselves. They were more interested in doing good works to develop of New London county, particularly in education, not for publicity or self-aggrandizement. Such a stance may seem “off the wall” to today’s celebrity and fame driven culture. As he considers expanding his research into a full-length book, Mr. Emanuel notes that it will be a “tough sell because there is no scandal involved. These were real, straightlaced people.”

From their portraits adorning the Williams Room and the main office, five members of the Williams family look over the daily bustle of the school that honors them. Through his research, Mr. Emanuel breathes life into their stories below, bringing them off the walls and illuminating how their works make a difference into the present.

Harriet Peck Williams
March 17, 1795–October 14, 1880

Harriet Peck was born in Norwich to Captain Bela Peck and his first wife, Betsey Billings Peck. Her mother was a descendant of the Leffingwell family, who were among the founders of Norwich. Her father was a member of the Connecticut militia and a well respected citizen of Norwich who died of old age in his 92nd year.

Harriet married Gen. William Williams on March 13, 1812. They remained a loving, devoted couple, celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary in a gala affair that was one of the first of its kind in Norwich. Mrs. Williams was a kind and caring woman despite the many tragedies suffered by her family. Her only brother, William, died at age 17, and her only sister, Charlotte, died at age 28. The first of her three children, William, died at 1 year, 9 months; her third son, Bela, died at age 14. Her four grandsons all died in infancy.

Her good works were many, most notable of which being the founding of the Peck Library at Norwich Free Academy in memory of her father, the granting of land for what is now Park Congregational Church in Norwich, and the donation of the set of bells in that church’s steeple.

Her most prominent act of benevolence came as the result of the hardest tragedy for her to bear—the sudden death of her beloved son, Thomas W. Williams II, in 1855. Rising above her grief, she bequeathed in her will funds that would create a high school for “the promotion and advancement of female education... said high school shall be forever called in memorial of my dear son “The Williams Memorial Institute.”” Mrs.
Williams saw the need for educating young women at a time when few saw it as a priority. The school opened in 1891 on Broad Street in New London on a plot of land where Thomas II had planned to build his new home. In 1955, the school moved to its present location on the Connecticut College campus.

Harriet Peck Williams died of old age in Norwich at age 85 and is buried with her husband in the family plot in Yantic Cemetery, Norwich.

Thomas Wheeler Williams II
July 14, 1815–September 12, 1855

Thomas W. Williams II was born in Norwich to Gen. William and Mrs. Harriet P. Williams, the only one of their three sons to live beyond his teen years. He was the namesake of his uncle, Maj. Thomas W. Williams. Thomas II settled in New London and became a partner in his father’s whaling firm, Williams & Barns. The business soon came to rival Maj. Thomas’s firm, Williams & Haven, as well as that of the Lawrence family (founders of Lawrence Hospital, which later merged with Memorial Hospital to become the present L & M Hospital in New London.) Thomas and his wife Amanda established a fund to support indigent sailors in New London. Thomas II was at the peak of his career when he died suddenly of what is listed on his death certificate as “brain congestion.” According to newspaper accounts of the day, he had just disembarked at Water Street from his firm’s ship North Star, having seen that it was properly fitted for departure on a whaling voyage. Feeling his head grow warm, he proceeded to his barber, thinking that a nice shampoo might soothe the heat. The shampoo did not ease his discomfort, so he asked that cold water be poured on his head. By this time, he had developed chills. Noticing his distressed condition, several of his friends carried him from the barbershop to his home on Huntington Street where, within a matter of hours, he died.

The tributes printed in the local newspapers during the following days unanimously state that he was a highly respected businessman and much loved friend who would be sorely missed by all. He is buried with his wife and children in Cedar Grove Cemetery, New London.

General William Williams
March 12, 1788–October 28, 1870

General Williams, a member of the Connecticut militia, was born in Stonington, Conn. to William Williams III and Mercy Wheeler Williams. After attending Plainfield Academy in Plainfield, Conn., he traveled to Europe. While in France, he met Napoleon Bonaparte.

He returned to Connecticut, where he met and married Harriet Peck of Norwich. The couple lived for a time on Golden Street in New London and then moved to Williams Avenue (now Chelsea Parade) in Norwich. In Norwich, Gen. Williams became a merchant, first in flour, then, as a partner with Calvin Goddard, in cotton. He eventually founded the whaling firm of Williams and Barns with New London merchant Acors Barns.

Among his many works of charity and philanthropy were frequent visits to the Mohegan tribe to conduct Sunday school, donation of some of his land in Norwich for the establishment of
Norwich Free Academy, and the grant to the city of New London of Williams Park at Broad and Williams streets. He died of old age in Norwich during his 82nd year, a well respected and prominent citizen.

**Amanda Gibson Williams**  
1821–October 12, 1858

Amanda Gibson was born in Canandaigua, New York to Henry B. and Sarah Sherman Gibson. Her father was a prominent citizen and businessman in Canandaigua, earning his fortune through banking and railroads. In 1823, he helped to negotiate a treaty between the U. S. and the Seneca Indian tribe.

Amanda married Thomas W. Williams II, son of Gen. William and Mrs. Harriet P. Williams. Amanda and Thomas lived at 35 Huntington Street in New London, during which time she bore four sons, none of whom survived infancy. In 1855, she was widowed by the death of her husband, leaving her alone and far from her family in the Finger Lakes region of central New York. She was, however, comforted by the kind treatment of her husband’s family, as she mentions in her own words within her Last Will and Testament, housed in New London Probate Court. She died at age 37 in New London of “nervous fever” and is buried with her husband and children in Cedar Grove Cemetery, New London.

**Major Thomas Wheeler Williams**  
Sept. 28, 1789–December 31, 1874

Major Williams, a member of the Connecticut militia, was born in Stonington, Conn., to William Williams III and Mercy Wheeler Williams. After his education, he settled in New London, eventually building his mansion on Huntington Street where the Garde Arts Center is now located. Maj. Williams established the whaling firm of Williams and Haven with Henry P. Haven, a man who, among other accomplishments, founded the New London Public Library and was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives. Williams & Haven grew to be the most prosperous whaling company in what was to become known as “The Whaling City.”

Maj. Williams’s first wife, Lucretia W. Perkins, was the granddaughter of Nathaniel Shaw, whose mansion on Bank Street in New London now houses the New London County Historical Society. Together, they had five children, one of whom, Charles Augustus Williams, lived to inherit his father’s whaling firm and was elected, as was his father, to be mayor of New London.

Maj. Williams was a member of the U. S. House of Representatives and the president of the New London/Willimantic/Palmer Railroad. He died in New London at age 85 and is buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery, New London with his two wives and nine children.

During Earth Day 2007, Peter Emanuel’s advisee group cleaned up the grounds of Williams Memorial Park in New London, including the headstones for Thomas and Amanda Williams and their four infant children. It was a small act of community service that echoed their own good works.

Through their lives and their enduring legacy of their gifts, the Williams family has been making a difference in the community across the lifespan of the country.