



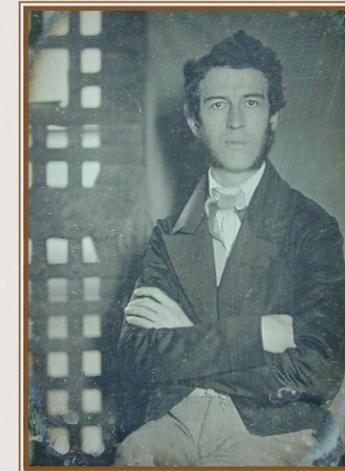
PASSMORE WILLIAMSON'S VISITORS' BOOK

Laurie A. Rofini

One of the most unusual and important scrapbooks in the collections of Chester County Historical Society was made by Passmore Williamson. The book documents a pivotal time in Williamson's life and in our nation's history.

Passmore Williamson was born Feb. 23, 1822 into a Chester County Quaker family, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Pyle Williamson. On July 27, 1855, Williamson was committed to Moyamensing Prison, where he would spend the next 100 days. What took Passmore Williamson from Chester County to a Philadelphia jail, imprisoned on the order of a federal judge?

By the 1840s, Williamson and his family had moved into Philadelphia. Both Thomas and Passmore were conveyancers; they drew up legal documents for transferring land, such as deeds and leases. At the age of twenty, in 1842, Passmore Williamson joined one of the most polarizing movements in our country's history - abolitionism. Anti-slavery was not popular, and its supporters were often seen as troublemakers. Williamson became a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), which elected him secretary in 1848. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, however, was considered by Garrisonian abolitionists as too moderate. These abolitionists were called "Garrisonian" because they aligned themselves with William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the uncompromising anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*.



Passmore Williamson in Moyamensing Prison, Philadelphia, 1855. Quarter plate daguerreotype attributed to John Steck, Philadelphia. Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA.

While remaining a member of PAS, Williamson joined the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, a more radical group that welcomed men and women, white and black into membership. The Anti-Slavery Society called for the immediate end of slavery. Many of its members participated in the Underground Railroad, a clandestine network that assisted freedom seekers who had escaped from slavery.

Williamson's involvement in radical abolitionism, along with his failure to attend Quaker meeting, led to his disownment by the Society of Friends in 1848. They no longer considered him a member. In spite of this, he married Mercie Knowles Taylor in a Quaker ceremony later that same year. The couple would have four children, two girls and two boys.

Passmore Williamson soon became an integral member of the Anti-Slavery Society, which often held its annual meetings in West Chester's Horticultural Hall. He was a member of the Acting Committee of its Vigilance Committee. Williamson, along with three African American men on the Acting Committee, provided direct support to fugitive slaves.

Mary L. Bailey Phil^a
 Anna L. Bickle Richmond
 Mary A. Leeds N. York
 Samuel Bailey Phil^a
 Abraham J. Morrison Connecticut
 20 Jehiel C. Beman Middletown Conn
 J. J. Simons
 Jacob R. Galt New York
 Harriet Tubman
 Catharine Green Philadelphia
 Jas. Clark of Philada
 John Ferguson Richmond Virginia
 Philadelphia

Oct. 20 Lewis W. Lucas Philada
 James Bowleg Morada
 M. B. Felt Philada
 C. W. Rice
 21 Frederick Douglass, Rochester, N.Y.
 22 Clifford J. Parker Philada
 Sampson Towner Philadelphia
 Willet Hamman Syracuse, N.Y.
 R. J. Fougerey Philada
 George Chegan Phila
 Thomas L. Jones
 W. W. Kidgway near Crosswicks N.Y.
 24 Wm. A. Spearman Chester Co.
 24 A. S. Harris Fall River Mass.



On July 15, 1855, William Still arrived at Williamson's office with news of an enslaved woman who wished to be free. Still, the head of the Acting Committee, would later publish a renowned history of the Underground Railroad. The woman, Jane Johnson, was traveling with two young sons and her master, Colonel John H. Wheeler. Wheeler was headed to Nicaragua to serve as the American minister, and they would only be in Philadelphia briefly before they took a ferry to Camden.

Under Pennsylvania law at that time, any enslaved person who was brought into the state was considered free if he or she wished to be so. Williamson and Still, along with five African American dockworkers, approached Wheeler and his party as they sat on the docked ferry. While Still told Johnson that she and her children were free and could leave, Williamson explained the situation to Wheeler.

A brief altercation followed, with the dockworkers preventing an infuriated Wheeler from following Johnson as Still escorted her off the ferry. Passmore Williamson returned to his office. He found out from Still that Johnson and her sons were safe, but he did not ask, nor was he told, anything about her location.

Colonel Wheeler approached his friend Judge John Kintzing Kane, a pro-slavery Democrat who served in the Federal District Court. Judge Kane ordered Passmore Williamson to appear and present Jane Johnson and her sons in court. Williamson responded that he could not, as he never had custody of Johnson and did not know where she was. Judge Kane refused to believe Williamson and ordered him to jail. William Still and the dockworkers were put on trial for riot and assault and battery. Colonel Wheeler maintained that Jane Johnson

had not wanted to leave him and that Still had forcibly abducted her. This lie was dramatically countered when Jane Johnson appeared in the courtroom, took the stand, and boldly refuted Wheeler's statements. Her brave appearance exposed her to considerable danger but her testimony was pivotal. Still was found not guilty and the dockworkers were either acquitted or found guilty of lesser charges. Meanwhile, Passmore Williamson remained in jail.

Williamson was consistent in his denial that he had ever known what happened to Johnson. His imprisonment was widely covered in the press, which saw Williamson as the victim of a "tyrannical judge." The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society made sure that he remained in the public eye. A lithograph of Williamson in his cell was printed

and sold. The image was likely based on a daguerreotype now held by Chester County Historical Society. His imprisonment was so helpful to the cause that Lucretia Mott observed that Thomas Williamson, his father, was "only afraid Passmore will come out of Prison too soon."



Because the book's binding must be restored and each page needs to be cleaned and treated, the conservation work will cost approximately \$25,500, of which over a third has already been raised.

Tips on Creating an Archival Scrapbook

by Nancy E. Kraft, Preservation Librarian, University of Iowa Libraries,
for the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium

Extend the life of your scrapbook by using archival material. The ideal scrapbook would be constructed with 100% archival materials, including a protective cover, a hinge that allows the book to comfortably expand, and a size that is easy to shelve or store.

- 1 Select a scrapbook with a hinge that allows the book to comfortably expand. "D" or "O" type three-ring, poly post, multi-ring, and strap are popular bindings that allow for expansion.
- 2 Use only the right hand page or tear out every other sheet if the scrapbook is bound or the hinge does not provide enough room to expand.
- 3 Pages should be white or off-white archival, acid-free 80 lb weight or better.
- 4 A charcoal or artist's pad that is 100% cotton rag with sturdy weight pages can be used as a scrapbook. These pads are bound. To prevent the book from bulging, attach the items to the right-hand side of the page only. Leave the first and last page blank to provide extra protection. You can strengthen the cover by attaching a title sheet with a glue stick.
- 5 A good functioning 3-ring binder, preferably fabric covered, can also be used to create a scrapbook. Check to be certain the rings will not pop open on their own and will close completely (even a small opening will allow pages to slip out).
- 6 Archival paper which is 80 lb weight or better can be used as well as archival plastic page protectors and photograph pages available in a variety of combinations for scrapbook pages. Leave a blank page at the beginning and end of the notebook for added protection against wear and tear.
- 7 If you choose to use plastic page protectors, purchase them from a recognized archival products company. Many "PVC-free" plastics that are available through discount stores are not archival. Archival plastics include DuPont Mylar™ polyester, polypropylene, and polyethylene. These pages are often available at a photo shop.
- 8 Resources for archival quality scrapbooks include Creative Memories, Gaylord, Hollinger Metal Edge, LBS/Archival Products, and other companies that offer archival quality products.
- 9 Attach your photographs, postcards, and other items with archival photo corners. Mylar mounting corners are often available from a photographic supply store and are recognized as archival. Avoid tape as much as possible since it will eventually cause yellowing and may "ooze" and cause items and pages to stick together.
- 10 Attach newspaper clippings to the pages with a water-soluble or washable, non-toxic glue stick. Cut your clipping long enough so that you can create a hinge for the glue.
- 11 Make sure to identify the origin of your clippings, photographs, and other memorabilia. Provide the date, the source of the item, names, and places.
- 12 Flowers and other objects can be put into a polyethylene zip-lock bag then attached to the page using white cotton thread.

Although in jail, Williamson was not a typical prisoner. He was allowed home briefly to see his newborn daughter. He also kept a visitors' register. The book contains the signatures or names of the over 500 people that came to see him. The National Colored Convention met in Philadelphia that October, and many of its attendees visited, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Mary Ann Shadd (former West Chester resident but living in Ontario in 1855). Williamson also received letters, including those from Senator Charles Sumner, poet John Greenleaf Whittier, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Progressive Friends (Longwood), and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Passmore and Mercie Williamson would later name their youngest son for Sumner, perhaps in gratitude for the abolitionist senator's support. Senator Sumner's letter is among the many letters that are mounted in the back of the book, behind the visitors' signatures.

The clamor for Williamson's release did not wane, and Judge Kane eventually relented to the public pressure. Williamson was released on November 3, 1855. He would later bring suit against Judge Kane for unlawfully detaining him. The suit ended when Kane died in 1858.

While his imprisonment was the most remarkable event in Passmore Williamson's life, it was not the only time he took action in a significant anti-slavery case. Nor was it the first time he had crossed paths with Judge Kane. It was Kane who ruled that the defendants in the 1852 Christiana Resistance could be tried for treason. Williamson, along with others in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, assisted the defendants. Williamson was also an early supporter of voting rights for women.

Passmore Williamson led an extraordinary public life of service, but his personal life became troubled. His father Thomas died in 1871, leaving Passmore executor of what was then a substantial estate. In the course of settling his father's affairs, Williamson lost money in several speculative investments. His two sisters sued him, believing he had mishandled their inheritance, but the court's resolution of the case is unknown. In addition to his financial difficulties, his imprisonment had left him in ailing health.

Passmore Williamson died at the age of seventy-three, on February 28, 1895. He is buried next to his wife Mercie, who died in 1878, and his father Thomas in a Friends cemetery in Upper Darby. His visitors' book stayed in his family until 1944, when it was donated to Chester County Historical Society by Passmore Williamson Lloyd, Passmore Williamson's great-grandson.

Passmore Williamson's visitors' book was named the People's Choice Award winner in the recent Top 10 Endangered Artifacts in Pennsylvania campaign. To learn more about the Top 10 campaign, visit <http://www.patop10artifacts.org/artifacts/visitors-book>. To find out how you can donate to support the book's restoration, please contact David Reinfeld at 610.692.4800 ext. 267 or dreinfeld@chestercohistorical.org.

Laurie A. Rofini is Director of Chester County Archives and Records Services, which is administered for the County of Chester by the Chester County Historical Society. All photographs of the visitors' book are courtesy of Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts, Philadelphia, PA. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Daily Local News.

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a staunch abolitionist, wrote to congratulate Williamson, telling him "it is a privilege to suffer for truth." The next year Sumner nearly died after he was attacked and caned on the Senate floor by a representative from South Carolina.

Meanwhile accept my congratulation on the position of responsibility & dignity which is yours. It is a privilege to suffer for truth; & I envy not the weariness of that soul, which would hesitate to prefer your place within the stone walls of a prison to the cushioned seat of that magistrate by whose writ you have been condemned.

Believe me, my dear Sir,
with much regards,
my faithfully yours,
Charles Sumner

Passmore Williamson & Mercie
Moyamensing Prison,
Philadelphia.