

John Williams: 1767-1825¹

MICHAEL D. McMULLEN

Professor of Church History,
Managing Editor MJT,

Director of the Wilberforce Journals Project,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

It is the contention of this Article, that the name of John Williams should be far more known in both missionary and ministry circles than it is.² This is argued because Williams has rightly been described as, “the man who was largely instrumental in bringing the new missionary movement into prominence in the American churches.”³ This is quite an accolade, and all the more interesting when one remembers Williams was Welsh. This glaring lack of credit for such an achievement, goes hand in hand with the ignorance that it was also Williams who was one of the founders and leaders of the earliest missionary society in America, the New York Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1806.⁴

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² The American Baptist Historical Society in Atlanta, GA., has much of the original correspondence received by John Williams which reflects his close ties with English Baptists and his interest in foreign missions. The correspondents include William Carey, William Ward, Andrew Fuller, John Ryland and John Sutcliffe. For further information see http://abhsarchives.org/docs/Colgate_Manuscripts.pdf.

³ L. and M. Williams, *Serampore Letters: being the Unpublished Correspondence of William Carey and others with John Williams, 1800-1816* (New York, NY: F.H. Revell Co., 1892), iv.

⁴ *Ibid.*

A Need for Ongoing research

The few, brief biographical sketches that exist of John Williams often note the difficulty of the task of constructing a detailed account of his life⁵, for such reasons as given in the following example, “Distinguished for his quiet usefulness, he was no less remarkable for his unpretending modesty; and such was the reserve which he always maintained on the subject of his own feelings and history, that with much difficulty were gathered the materials for the scanty notice of his life which follows.”⁶

Family Background and early life

John Williams was born on the family farm, known as Plas Llecheiddior, near the village of Y Garn in Caernarvonshire, North Wales, on March 8, 1767. His father was William Roberts, and according to the practiced custom of the day, John took his surname from his father’s Christian name. John would have naturally entered into the family work of farming, something that previous members of his family had been doing for at least 150 years at Plas Llecheiddior. However, even though John was described as being sturdy, he also suffered from some physical disability that evidently ruled out that future for him. His father’s wish then became clear, that his son would enter the ministry of the Church of England. It was clear fairly quickly however, that that wish was not shared by John Williams, possessing as he did, a number of serious reservations about the established church. He decided instead to move to the city of Caernarvon with the intent of there acquiring a trade. The most reliable information we have suggests he was converted at the age of 19, and that through a mixture of circumstances. He heard a sermon by David Morris, a follower of George Whitefield which clearly played a

⁵ There are some manuscript collections that need further research, including the Archives of the New York Historical Society, which hold ‘Baptist Church Records, 1793-1862.’ The Records state that the manuscripts in this collection relate mostly to the Fayette Street Baptist Church and to its successor institution, the Oliver Street Baptist Church.

⁶ C.G. Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D. late chaplain to the humane and criminal institutions in the city of New York: together with an appendix, comprising brief memoirs of the late Rev. John Williams, the Rev. Thomas Baldwin, D.D., and the Rev. Richard Furman, D.D.* (New York: Swords, Stanford and Co., 1835), 345.

part, and also at about the same time, he acknowledges the spiritual impact of a Welsh translation of John Bunyan's, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*. Bunyan published this work 7 years before his death, and even in that short intervening period, a number of Welsh translations appeared.⁷

His early Christian development

John Williams joined a local Independent Church, under the ministry of Rev. Dr. Lewis, and very quickly gained a reputation as an avid student of Scripture and theological books. Upon receiving no satisfactory response from Lewis however, on the meaning of the passage, 'Buried with him in baptism' (Colossians 2:12), and in fact, being told by Lewis that, "I really think the Baptists have, in the interpretation of that text, the advantage over us," he felt God leading him elsewhere.⁸ After further prayer and reflection, Williams soon joined by baptism, the Horeb Baptist Church at Garn. He was at that point just twenty one years old, and though young spiritually, his maturity was soon recognized. Friends encouraged him to develop his evident gifts by becoming a student at the well-respected Bristol Baptist College. Williams chose not to pursue this path however, an action he regretted often in later life, believing his time on earth would soon be cut short by Tuberculosis. He had had experiences of physical pain in his chest in his early preaching, and believing he had contracted the then, deadly disease, decided he would dedicate his remaining time to the ministry. He would soon see God working in that direction, for he had not been long in membership in the Horeb Church, when he was asked to become their minister.

Ministry at Horeb Baptist Church

Williams was very active in that calling, for the congregation met in several location and as their minister, he would travel much throughout both North and South Wales, in the process of which he gained great respect among Welsh Christians. It was at that period of his

⁷ The complete title of the volume is, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ: Or A Plain and Profitable Discourse on John 6:37. Showing the cause, truth, and manner of the coming of a sinner to Jesus Christ; with his happy reception and blessed entertainment* (London: 1681).

⁸ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 348.

ministry, that he became a friend and fellow-traveler of the renowned Welsh Baptist preacher, Christmas Evans, a friendship that would not be broken by geographical distance for they became regular correspondents until Williams' death. After a period of about seven years of being at the Horeb Church, Williams felt called to leave his beloved homeland and emigrate to America with one of his younger brothers. This was not received well by Christmas Evans, who opposed such emigration, resulting as it did he believed, in great loss to the church of Wales of some of her most beloved and respected ministers. In fact, Evans would later say that John Williams was "the only Welsh Baptist who had prospered spiritually in America."⁹ In another letter written by Joshua Thomas to Samuel Jones in 1796, he also very much lamented William's going to America, for Williams "was a very worthy man in the principality, I was very sorry that he quitted his station."¹⁰

Emigration to America

The two brothers landed in New York City on 25 July, 1795, but tragedy would soon strike, for within two weeks, John's brother died very suddenly. John was informed of the tragic event that had occurred in Schuyler's Mines, what is now a deserted copper mine near Newark, New Jersey, and he immediately set out to walk from where he was in New York City. His son William later wrote, that it was this sudden loss that resulted in his father beginning to doubt the call to America was of God, and that maybe he had acted rashly in emigrating.¹¹ The situation was not helped by John himself also becoming seriously ill soon after. It appears that the exertion of the journey to New Jersey, coupled with the suddenness of the loss, resulted in Williams contracting a severe fever. But in God's providence, even as violent as it was, it would pass and John did recover.

⁹ Christmas Evans, 'Hanes y Bedyddwyr ym Mon', Seren Homer (1880) as quoted in H.M. Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren: Rev. Samuel Jones (1735-1814) and his friends* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1995), 237.

¹⁰ Joshua Thomas to Samuel Jones, November 4, 1796, McKesson Collection (Jones Section), HSP, as quoted in Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren*, 237.

¹¹ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 350.

The beginning of his ministry in America

Maybe because of his lack of command of English together with the newness of his arrival in America, Williams' intention had been to settle amongst other Welsh immigrants and to minister to them in their native language. Beulah in Pennsylvania was one such enclave that he considered might be his next step, but with the leading of God, that never materialized. Williams' first sermon in America would indeed be delivered in Welsh, but it would occur in the church pastored by John Stanford in Fair Street, New York City.

The small, pastor-less Baptist Church in Fayette Street, later to become the Baptist Church in Oliver Street, occasionally permitted Williams and other Welsh Baptists to use their sanctuary. Over the course of the next few months, the twenty or so members who worshipped in English, began to see a possible resolution to their pulpit problem. It was recorded that they saw in John Williams, "a deep and fervent piety, and a native vigor of mind, which greatly delighted them."¹² The members had asked Williams to work on acquiring more command of English, with the result that he would begin preaching to both congregations on the same Sunday, one time in English and then later in Welsh. After a trial period of nine months, on 28 August, 1798, Williams received the unanimous call of the Fayette Street Baptist Church to become their Pastor.¹³ This coincided with one of the most virulent outbreaks of Yellow Fever in New York City's history, with Williams himself contracting the fever in its early spread. Several times Williams would suffer from similar contagions, and though the prognosis was not good, he again survived what could easily have been a fatal fever.

The blessing of his ministry

God continued to openly bless John Williams' ministry. In 1800, for example, John Bowen of New York wrote to his former pastor, that Williams' congregation had received "some pleasing additions within the last twelve months."¹⁴ Bowen went on to describe Williams as, "a very zealous, humble man of unimpeachable character."¹⁵ In that same year,

¹² Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 351.

¹³ Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 55.

¹⁴ 'John Bowen to John Rippon, February 12, 1800', in Letters to Dr. Rippon from New York, in 'Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society', vol.1, no.2 (April 1909), as quoted in Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren*, 236.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

with this and additional growth, “the place became too strait, and in 1800, the meeting-house was enlarged to 60 times 43 feet, and galleries were added.”¹⁶ This would itself, later be replaced by a third meeting-house in Williams’ pastorate, when a large stone building was erected measuring 64 times 94 feet. Williams’ ministry was an incredibly busy one, with him generally preaching three times a day. “One Sabbath nearer the end,”¹⁷ was his usual saying before his Sunday evening rest. He personally baptized a minimum of 440 persons, not counting others he baptized on Long Island and elsewhere.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in November 1801, he found time to marry, and the result was a happiness of life he had hitherto not known. His son, William, was born October 14, 1804, and would follow in his father’s footsteps, as he too followed his own call into the ministry. The following very personal testimony was given of John at William’s ordination, by Rev. Dr. Wayland:

“Many years have elapsed since I waited upon the instructions of that venerable man. Since then, I have seen many meek, many holy, many humble, many able, many peace-making ministers of the New Testament; but I have seen yet no one who has reminded me of John Williams.”¹⁹

Williams may have lacked formal theological education, but he devoured books of Christian theology. He studied intently and repeatedly giants in the Faith, such as Jonathan Edwards, John Owen and Andrew Fuller. He also loved the works of the Puritans, “From the more familiar beauties of Henry and Bunyan, up to the sublimity and grandeur of Owen and Charnock, he had attentively perused the most distinguished works produced by that venerable race of confessors.”²⁰ His son, William, was very honest when he wrote that his father, “made no pretensions to learning, but of theological learning he was certainly possessed in a high

¹⁶ Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 55.

¹⁷ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 359.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁹ H.C. Fish, *Pulpit Eloquence of the Nineteenth Century: Being supplementary to the history and repository of pulpit eloquence, deceased divines; and containing discourses of eminent living ministers in Europe and America, with sketches biographical and descriptive* (New York, NY: M.W. Dodd, 1857), 225.

²⁰ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 361.

degree.”²¹ The size of the library that John Williams was able to gradually acquire was said to be clear testimony of his fondness for books. He was also remembered as one who spent much time and labor in the business of sermon preparation, and after his passing, more than two thousand skeletons of sermons in manuscript were discovered.²²

His influence in the cause of Baptist missions

The early history of the New York Missionary Society is not entirely clear, but it seems to have been formed in 1796. We do know certain specific things, including the existence of letters from Williams to Carey written in 1799, giving him an account of the work of the Society in America, and asking for correspondence in return, detailing the work of Carey in India. Such a reply was written December 9, 1800 in which Carey says,

“We have sent two copies of the gospel by Matthew in Bengallee at the end of which are some other little tracts, hymns, etc., in that language, which we have dispersed, we beg your acceptance of one copy and also that you will present the other in our name to The New York Mission Society as a token of our sincere union with them in the great object of their undertaking.”²³

We also know that in the American Society’s Report for 1801, the name of John Williams appears as one of its Directors. What seems to have transpired, is that as British Baptist Missionaries found it increasingly difficult to gain direct passage to India, courtesy of the intervention by the East India Company, they would be re-routed via America. John Williams soon emerged as an important point of contact between American Baptists, British Baptists on the mission field, and Baptists who remained in Britain.

Many extant letters testify for example, to the indebtedness of English Baptists in the commencement of work in America, as evidenced for example, in the letter William Carey wrote to John Williams in

²¹ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 359.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For the full text of the letter, see Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 59-64.

October, 1812, announcing the conversion of Adoniram Judson and others to Baptist principles:

“My dear brother.

It is a long time since I wrote to you. My numerous avocations must be my apology, and indeed this apology is the true one, for want of will is not the cause. I shall, however, now write you a short note to make amends for my long silence, and request a continuance of your correspondence. You as well as myself are acquainted with the circumstances of five brethren having been sent from America to begin a mission in the East. They have all safely arrived at this place.”²⁴

He then proceeds to give an account of how the Judsons and Rice became convinced of Baptist principles, and what he believed needed to happen in the light of that development:

“We shall advance them temporary supplies, but we are not able to invite them to become missionaries for the BMS without first writing to England and receiving our brethren’s consent. Our brethren Judson and Rice would also be glad to be American missionaries. Cannot our Baptist brethren in America for a missionary society, either auxiliary to our society in England or distinct from it, as may appear most eligible, and take these brethren as their missionaries? I believe they are men of the right stamp.”²⁵

Soon after this Williams received a letter from Thomas Baldwin, Lucius Bolles and Daniel Sharp, Baptist leaders in Boston, asking for his advice as to the best course of action in the circumstances. As one reads the letter, it is very plain to see therein, the seeds of what would become known as The Triennial Convention:

“We have already two societies formed....but dear brethren, we want your advice and assistance. We would gladly engage all our

²⁴ Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

churches throughout the United States in this great work of sending the preached gospel among the heathen. The difficulty seems to be, in part at least, to fix upon a proper plan. There must be somewhere a common center, a general treasury into which all the money in whatever way raised may flow. We have no anxiety whether this deposit should be in Salem, Boston, New York or Philadelphia, provided we can only fall upon a plan that will unite all hearts.....We hope your late efforts in raising money for repairing the loss at Serampore by the late fire will not discourage you in the present undertaking, as we will most cheerfully advance the first necessary installment.”²⁶

It should not come as any real surprise then, to learn that because of the growing relationship between Baptists in America and Britain, fruitful in so many ways, that it was said “the interference of the British Government was really a blessing in disguise.”²⁷ As well as letters to John Williams from Carey, letters are extant from Andrew Fuller, John Ryland, Joshua Rowe, John Chamberlain, Richard Marden and several other Baptist ministers and missionaries. The letters repeatedly testify to the mutual interest of Baptists in the progress of the mission work then being undertaken, both in America and in India, particularly at the Serampore Mission. As Carey wrote to Williams in November, 1803:

“Having an opportunity of writing by the return of Mr. Smith and family to New York, I can not let it pass without asking you how you do, and how affairs are going on in America at large, and at New York in particular. Having at this time written to several correspondents at Philadelphia and other places in America all that I can say about ourselves can be only like the dull repetition of a twice told tale. I shall therefore be very short upon that head and enquire about the American Missions. Do the Societies go on with courage?.....Is anything being done towards translating the Bible into the different Indian languages?”²⁸

²⁶ Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 147.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸ Williams, *Serampore Letters*, 131.

In the midst of such activity, John Williams is also to be found as one of the Founders of the American Bible Society in 1816. Moreover, it should probably not be regarded as any coincidence in the light of all the correspondence previously referred to, that the ABS sent a gift of \$1,000 to William Carey to support his Scripture translation work in India.²⁹

His closing days

From 1823 onwards, Williams was in obvious need of pastoral assistance, and Rev. Spencer Cone was appointed to be his associate. In fact, Oliver Street Baptist Church as it became, would be counted as one of the largest Baptist Churches in New York City. But Williams' labors had begun to take their toll, and "he had about this period, from various causes, begun to decline, and the feebleness of his body seemed to obscure the energies of his mind."³⁰ This was followed by his contracting the flu in the winter of 1824, which only weakened him further. On May 22, 1825, after having had breakfast and spending some time talking with a visiting young Baptist minister from Vermont, Williams then spent a short period reading one of his favorite Jonathan Edwards' volumes, the *Treatise on the Affections*. When his wife entered the room, he said to her that as often as he had read "this work of Edwards," he saw in it new beauties at every reading, "he speaks so sweetly of Jesus."³¹

His son William records that his father then walked into an adjoining bedroom to lay down, soon became uneasy, and expressed his desire to rise instead. His wife helped him to a chair, and a moment later, at about 9.40am, John Williams passed into the presence of Christ. His funeral service was preached by the very same minister, John Stanford, who had allowed Williams to preach in his church, his very first sermon in America. John Williams was temporarily laid to rest in the old-burying ground corner of Amity and Wooster Streets, adjoining the Amity Street Baptist Church, the church at which his son William was the minister. Temporarily, because in 1863, 1200 exhumations were ordered from that burial ground, including those of John Williams, with the remains being reinterred in the Cypress Hills Cemetery. One of the reasons given for the removal of the bodies was so that the land could be sold for

²⁹ <http://Americanbiblehistory.com/history.html>, accessed March 20, 2014.

³⁰ Sommers, *Memoir of the Rev. John Stanford, D.D.*, 358.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 354.

redevelopment, with the realized funds used to release the Baptist Church on Madison Avenue from the then debt it had accrued.³²

Additional works consulted

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'History of the First Baptist Church, New York City,' by S.H. Cone, in *Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record*, volume v, number 3, 1846, 43-48, 69-78.

'Sketch of the Life and Character of the Rev. John Williams, in *The American Baptist Magazine*, volume 5, no. 9, 1825, 257-272.

G.H. Hansell, *Reminiscences of Baptist Churches and Baptist Leaders in New York City and Vicinity, from 1835-1898* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication society, 1899).

John Williams, *A Discourse: Delivered April 5, 1803, in the Baptist Church in Gold Street, before the New York Missionary Society, at their Annual Meeting* (New York, NY: Isaac Collins, 1803).

³² 'Our fathers Where Are They? Exhumation of remains in the Amity Street burial ground', in *The New York Times*, February 17, 1863.