

MEMOIR

OF

JOSEPH WILLIAMSON

BY

WILLIAM CROSS WILLIAMSON

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JOSEPH WILLIAMSON was born in Belfast, Maine, on the 5th of October, 1828. He traced his descent from Timothy ¹ Williamson of Marshfield, a freeman of Plymouth Colony in 1657, who served in King Philip's War, and was buried August 6, 1676. His wife was Mary Howland. George ² Williamson, a son of Timothy, was born in Marshfield in 1675, and died in Middleboro, Mass., about 1742. His wife was Mary Crisp. Caleb, ³ son of George, was born in Harwich, Mass., in 1715, and removed to Canterbury, Conn., where he died August 9, 1795. He married Sarah Ransom of Middleboro, who died April 18, 1792, at the age of seventy. George, ⁴ son of Caleb, born in Middleboro, January 15, 1754, was a soldier in the Revolution, until the close of the war, when he took up his residence in Woodstock, Vt., where he was esteemed as farmer, innkeeper and selectman of the town. Thence emigrating to Maine, shortly before its separation from Massachusetts, he died in Bangor, October 10, 1822. His wife, who survived him, was Mary, daughter of William Foster of Canterbury, to whom he was married July 9, 1778. Her ancestor was Reginald Foster, who came, it is said, from Exeter, England, to Ipswich, Mass., about 1638. She was noted for her good sense and for her benevolent works. Possessed of phenomenal memory, especially of the holy scriptures, she left to her family a voluminous diary bearing testimony to that unquestioning faith in the Lord which sustained her through the trials and vicissitudes of a somewhat nomadic life. Of her eight children, the three sons who reached maturity preceded their father in his removal from Woodstock to Maine. These were William Durkee, later known as the historian

of the State ; George, who lived in Pittston, where he died in 1860 ; and Joseph, who came to Maine at nearly the same time with his brothers.

Joseph⁵ Williamson was born in Canterbury, August 5, 1789, and graduated at the University of Vermont in 1812. After serving the usual legal apprenticeship, he came to Belfast, and at once established himself as a lawyer. In 1820, Mr. Williamson was appointed County Attorney for Hancock County, an office which he again filled for Waldo County, when that County was formed in 1827. From 1822 until 1832 he was Postmaster ; and was elected to the Senate in 1832 and 1833, being its president during his last term. For several years he edited a local paper, was interested in politics, and delivered frequent speeches, lectures and addresses, and took a willing hand in every scheme for the education and improvement of his town and its inhabitants. In 1839 he received from Brown University the honorary degree of Master of Arts. Resolutions passed at a meeting of the bar of the Supreme Judicial Court, after his decease, make mention of "his indefatigable devotion to his profession, and of the esteem in which he was held and of his unvarying amenity of manners."

June 24, 1824, he married Caroline, daughter of William Cross of Newburyport, Mass. She was a descendant in the fourth generation from Ralph Cross of that town. In the old church there, where lie the bones of Rev. George Whitfield, may still be seen in the pulpit a bible bearing an inscription which declares it to be "the greeting of Mr. Ralph Cross, August 4, 1746." Ralph had a son who bore the same name. He, with his brother Stephen, were large shipbuilders before the Revolution, and when that crisis came both were unswerving in their support of the patriotic cause. Both went to the front. Ralph was commissioned Lieutenant of the Essex Regiment, and with his command took part in the memorable battle which occasioned the surrender of Burgoyne. His son William, for many years in business and for a long time holding the office of Surveyor of the Port of Newbury, was the father of Caroline named above. She died June 22, 1852, leaving four children, Joseph, William Cross,¹ George Ralph, and Caroline Cross.

Joseph⁶ Williamson, Junior, was fitted for college at the public schools and at the Academy of his native town, and graduated from

¹ Mr. Williamson died June 13, 1903, just after finishing this memoir of his brother.

Bowdoin College in 1849. Upon leaving Brunswick, he became a student at law in the office of his father, was in due time admitted to the bar, and began the practice of his profession in 1852. He was at first associated with, and finally succeeded, his father in business, thus in their joint lives they completed a continuous professional career in the same town, on the same spot, and under the same sign, of nearly ninety years. In 1853, Belfast became a city, and Mr. Williamson received from Governor Crosby the appointment of Judge of its Police Court, an office to which he was again chosen, the last time by the unanimous vote of his fellow citizens. In this official capacity he administered the oath of office to Hon. Ralph Cross Johnson, its first mayor, and to the members-elect of the first city government, a duty which, by a sort of tacit custom, he continued to perform every successive year as long as he lived.

From the day when his professional life began, Mr. Williamson was a hard working man, unsparing of pains and patience in behalf of a numerous clientage. The Maine Reports bear witness, from the beginning of his career to the end, to the able and conscientious labor which he brought to the preparation of his cases, as well as to the great variety of legal problems which came before him for consideration. The practice of law, during the greater part of his professional life, was not, as now, divided into specialties. The country lawyer was expected to be learned in every branch of his business, whether law, equity, or admiralty. Mr. Williamson's abilities brought remunerative employment, as well as friends who gave constant proofs of their never failing confidence. For several years he was elected and served as City Solicitor. His opinions upon matters of highways, of taxes and of the rights and obligations of towns and their officers, were greatly valued. Within the last decade, owing to the rapid rise in value of lands in Islesboro' and adjacent sea-side resorts, his services were in frequent demand in the examination of titles, especially such as involved obscure and difficult questions of fact and law. In this field his researches were complete and exhaustive, especially so because they were in line with those local historical inquiries which had been the delight of his life.

Such was his work. His recreation was found, from his earliest years, in the domain of history and biography. In boyhood he had prepared and written a history of Belfast, which formed the nucleus

of his later work. His first venture in print was in 1852, when he completed and had published the "Maine Register and Reference Book," giving an account of the institutions, corporations and business interests of the State. The enthusiasm which he brought to historical topics is amply displayed throughout the numerous articles which he contributed for publication to the Maine Historical Society, of which organization he was for many years Corresponding Secretary, and the meetings of which he rarely failed to attend from the time he was elected a member in 1850. Among these are the Journal of Governor Thomas Pownall with Notes; Castine and the old Coins found there; General Henry Knox; Capital Trials in Maine; Brigadier General Waldo; The British Occupation of Penobscot; Traces of the Northmen; Sir John Moore at Castine; Martin Pring; Memorials of Father Rale; Where is Columbus buried; The Professional Tours of John Adams in Maine; and the paper read before the society at the unveiling of the bust of Longfellow. They number about seventy formal contributions.

He also prepared articles, upon a great variety of subjects, for the Bangor Historical Magazine, the Maine Historical and Genealogical Register, and for the Republican Journal and other newspapers. In 1870 he gave an elaborate historical address at the centennial of the settlement of Belfast; and in 1894 he was the orator on the occasion of services held in commemoration of the installation of Rev. William Frothingham as Minister of the First Parish (Unitarian) Church of that town, at which he, as well as his father, had been life-long attendants.

In 1877, Mr. Williamson published his History of Belfast, a work which had been for twenty-five years in preparation, and which gives in great detail a complete story of the life of a New England town, from its settlement down to 1875. In the compiling of this volume, he followed the methods which were adopted by his uncle in gathering materials for his history of Maine. He went to original records and documents for information. Every statement of fact was made upon the best evidence. Not the smallest event was left to conjecture. A second volume of this history, bringing the account down to the close of the century, had been completed by the author, and awaits publication.

But the *magnum opus* of his later years was the Bibliography of Maine. This consists of two octavo volumes of 670 pages each,

Delfant, June 20. 1896.

Dear William:-

The preface to a book is the least
usually written, and the most difficult to write. I have dictated
the enclosed, this afternoon, which I wish you would read, and
make any amendments or additions which seem proper. It is quite
brief, because two pages of observations are to follow, and because
I think a long preface wears out. I had intended to preli-
minarily speak upon the history and condition of literature in Maine,
but as my work largely speaks the age originally contemplated, it
is omitted.

I am approaching the close of my labors; only fifty pages remain-
ing unprinted. The whole number of titles exceeds eleven thousand,
and the orig. references are nearly as many, twice as many, which
are unrecorded. Similar are an immense, I hardly expect the
publication to take place until the first of May.

You have not written for some time. I hope you have regained
your health, although the reconstruction workers have tried even
me who is well.

Yours,

Joseph Williamson

giving, with the exception of certain public, municipal and legal reports, the full title of every book, pamphlet and reputable magazine article which has been printed in, or which has reference to, Maine ; and all, also, of which the authors were, at the time of writing or publishing, residents within the State. A glance at its eleven thousand titles is sufficient to disclose the labor required for searching after and collecting the mass of information stored away in this reservoir, no less the good judgment and care required in the classification of subjects. Some idea of its value may be obtained from the lists which it contains of writings devoted to the Cilley Duel, Charlevoix, the voluminous literary progeny of Jacob Abbott, and the countless titles relating to incidents in the history of Maine. It is both a digest and a dictionary. These volumes were printed in 1896, under the auspices of the Maine Historical Society, and met with a gratifying approval especially from scholars, at home as well as abroad. In the year following their appearance, the author received from his *alma mater* the honorary degree of Litt.D., and in 1900, he was elected a member of the society of Phi Beta Kappa.

This work was, as the preface expresses it, a "labor of love." Neither for this nor for any other of the productions of his pen did the author receive any pecuniary reward. He might have said of himself, as did Agassiz, that he "had no time to give to the making of money"; but he seemed always to have time for works intended for posterity, "which delights in details." He was no recluse. He was generous of himself, of his time and of his historical treasures. His correspondence was large, but he never neglected it. He was never too busy to enjoy the society of friends and the amenities of daily life. No one ever wrote to him concerning an historical question without receiving a prompt and courteous reply, sometimes involving much time and study. No brother attorney ever consulted him upon a vexed question without finding him ready and eager to devote his best knowledge to the matter at hand. Especially by his friends among the younger members of the bar, he was beloved for his kindness and helpful, encouraging words. He was incapable of dissimulation. The same absolute truth which is manifest in his written work characterized his daily duties. He loved music. He delighted in the old melodies, in the time-honored hymns of the past. He took pleasure in his nightly play of whist ; but did not, like "Mrs. Sarah Battles," insist upon the "rigor of the game."

In the memorial service held in the Supreme Judicial Court after his death, Chief Justice Wiswall said :—

“He has argued many cases before the law court, and I know of my personal experience that it has always been a pleasure when a case was taken up for examination after argument to find a brief in the well-known handwriting, as clear and uniform as if engraved, of Brother Williamson. The members of the court always knew that his brief would be instructive and valuable and that every legitimate argument that could be made in support of his position would be made. But it always seemed to me that his most distinguishing and marked characteristic was his uniform courteousness and politeness. He was always a gentleman in the best sense of the word. While ever zealous in the protection of his clients’ rights and in presenting his side of the case to court or jury, he never forgot his dignity or his position as an officer of the court to the extent of entering into unseemly wrangles with the opposing lawyer.”

Mr. Williamson, at the time of his death, was the oldest living member of the Waldo Bar Association, and for many years had been its President. He was also President of its Library Association, to the establishment and support of which he had devoted his usual public spirit. He was elected a member of the New-England Historic Genealogical Society in 1874, and for many years was its Vice-President for Maine; was Vice-President of the Maine Society of the Sons of the Revolution; a member of the American Antiquarian Society; the American Historical Association; honorary member of the Maine Genealogical Society; corresponding member of the Massachusetts, Vermont, Wisconsin, Bangor and Buffalo Historical Societies, and of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts.

When the Belfast Free Library was established, in 1887, he was made President of the Board of Trustees. This office he filled with never-failing energy until his death, devoting himself with most assiduous attention to the interests of the library, and visiting it every day.

He was a devoted lover of his native town and of all the country around it. He loved its beautiful bay across which lay the old town of Castine, rich in romantic history, and the far away hills of Mount Desert beyond it, which are associated with the earliest civilization of the continent. His knowledge was unfailing upon all local matters. Like Sir Walter Scott, he had a story for every hill and hamlet, and like him, was never weary of recalling incidents and traditions concerning the early settlers. Facts which to others

seemed dull and unimportant were to him full of suggestions. A train of events followed one after the other like fancies, in his mind, but were always based upon a substratum of truth. With all his fondness for plain unvarnished truths, he had a keen relish for fiction. For the poets, the classic English novelists and writers—especially Johnson, Goldsmith and Thackeray—he had a life-long affection. He never forgot anything which he had once read. Characters, conversations, incidents long past, never seemed to pass out of his grasp, but remained and lived with him as realities.

He was married, October 22, 1857, to Ada Hortense Peirce, daughter of Waldo T. Peirce of Bangor. She died March 19, 1872, leaving a son, who inherits his father's name and profession, and two daughters, all of whom are living.

The last weeks of his life were saddened by the death of his youngest brother, George Ralph Williamson, who had but lately retired from business in New York and returned to live in his native town, where he died September 22, 1902. To a friend who came to condole with him and who asked him what he would do to bear up under this sorrow, Mr. Williamson replied, simply, "I still have my pen." And so for a little time he went manfully on.

On December 4, 1902, without premonition and without pain, in his own room, with his daughter and loving friends about him, he suddenly passed away.

"How happy is he born and taught
That serveth not another's will;
Whose armor is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill.

This man is free from servile bands
Of hope to rise or fear to fall;
Lord of himself though not of lands,
And, having nothing, yet hath all."

