

Israel Williams -- Man of Mystery...

We thought we knew all about the Founder of Williams Bay. Come to find out, we don't know him at all!

The sea captain from Connecticut, Captain Israel Williams, has long been thought to be the founder of the village of Williams Bay. But village historians only have part of the story correct. Even today, misinformation about the Captain continues to be found in literature about the village throughout the area.

Captain Williams was not a sea captain, nor was he from Connecticut. The Village of Williams Bay would have been called "Cole's Bay" had not Captain Williams "jumped" a claim owned by a Mr. Cole (no first name known). This whole incident led to the infamous "Battle of Geneva Lake", more about that later!.

Israel Williams born on the 24th of September 1789 in Ashfield, Hampshire, Massachusetts. He was the eighth child of "Rich" Ephraim Williams, one of the original settlers of Ashfield, Massachusetts, and his wife, Mercy Daniels. Both were from families of position and wealth. College-educated, deeply religious and civic-minded, Ephraim was wealthy enough to give each of his eight sons a large farm upon their marriage and his two daughters a generous dowry upon their marriages as well.

Israel was commissioned into the Massachusetts militia in the War of 1812. The mistaken notion that he was a sea captain can be attributed to another Israel Williams from Connecticut, some 50 years older and no relation to the Williams from Massachusetts, who WAS a famous sea captain, somehow was believed to be the same Israel Williams who discovered Williams Bay. Our Captain Williams was elected to the post of Captain of the militia in 1825, long after the War of 1812 was over. A clear case of mistaken identity that has lasted until today!

Israel married Lavina Joy born in May of 1808, daughter of Captain Nehemiah Joy, a teacher, of Cummington, Massachusetts. As a child, Lavina was taught by her father, along with another student, William Cullen Bryant, the soon-to-be famous romantic poet. To Israel and Lavina were born 11 children, 9 sons (two died shortly after birth and are buried in Massachusetts) and 2 daughters.

Israel worked for many years on his farm of some 3-400 sheep, when in the early 1830's it became apparent that many of the men from the local area were looking westward for new opportunities. Israel was one of them, and in the spring of 1835, he, his wife, her mother and

five of his children headed westward, sailing through the Great Lakes to Michigan, where they wintered. Israel sent his oldest son, Moses, that summer to scope out the Wisconsin Territory, where he had heard there was farm land, rich, plentiful and already tilled by the local Native Americans.

Moses returned several months later reporting he had found a likely location on the south shore of Wind Lake (Geneva Lake). The land was rich, the game plentiful and the local tribe, Chief Big Foot's Potawatomi, were due for removal the next fall. Moses had filed a claim for land on the south shore of the lake and built a small log cabin (located just east of where the old Northwestern Military Academy once stood.)

Very early in the spring of 1836, Israel and his older sons (the youngest, Festus, was four years old) headed to Wisconsin to prepare a home for the women who would be coming later in early summer, once Israel had found permanent location for their home. Find it he did- across the lake from where Moses' cabin stood was the second village of Chief Big Foot. On the western slope, some eighty feet above the summer wigwams of the tribe, was what looked like an abandoned claim- some blazed trees and the remains of a campfire. Partially cleared, it was the ideal location for Captain Williams' new home, next to the gardens of the Potawatomi.

Word of their arrival had been spreading through the few neighbors that were around the lake. One, a Mr. Cole, newly arrived from the East, where he had wintered, who upon hearing where Captain Williams had made his claim, jumped to his feet and shouted "That's MY claim!" After fortifying himself with some liquid courage, he and a few friends headed over to the Bay to "drive them damned Yankee claim jumpers out!"

Arriving at the claim site, Cole and his friends found Captain Williams and his boys busily clearing trees and splitting logs for the cabin. Cole demanded that Captain Williams "Get out or else!" to which Captain Williams told him that while Cole may have filed on the claim, he had not completed the process, nor paid the filing fee, thus opening the way for Captain Williams to file for the claim legally. Obviously too drunk to be responsible, Williams told Cole to clear off and come back to discuss the matter when he (Cole) was sober. Cole replied he'd be back, armed and ready to take his land back by force if necessary!

Cole returned the next day with two friends, armed. Captain Williams and his four boys met them, armed as well. The oldest Williams son, Moses, was 27. The youngest facing Cole & his comrades was Austin, 14. Captain Williams knew that one or more of his boys were going to be injured or killed if this situation spiraled out of control. Cole, on the other hand could count, and five against three was NOT good odds. Seeing Cole nervously begin to rock from one foot to

the other, Captain Williams tried to resolve the situation before gunfire erupted.

"I understand you feel you've been cheated, Cole" Williams began "I'll make it up to you. I don't have any hard cash, but I've got these rifles, an axe or two, or the cow," pointing towards



a Holstein tied nearby.

"What'll you take for your claim?" Cole looked at the unflinching posture of the Williams clan with their rifles pointed at him and his friends, who were by now wishing they were anywhere but there, swallowed and said "I'll take the cow!"

Bloodshed was avoided, the Williams built a fine log cabin, Mr. Cole probably got quite a good price for a fine Holstein cow and the legend of the "Battle of Geneva Lake" was created!

On July 4, 1836, the rest of the Williams family arrived from Michigan. Israel Williams went on to be the First Justice of the Peace in the area. The first wedding he performed was that of his daughter, Hannah, to Mr. Robert Russell in 1838. School for local children began in 1839 at the Williams home which eventually would become known as the "Buckhorn Tavern" a popular stop on the stagecoach run from



Beloit to Racine that passed through Williams Bay for a number of years. In 1844, Captain Williams became the first postmaster. He was known to be a just and upright man.

In 1845, there was a malaria & cholera outbreak that caused the deaths of Moses and Austin Williams and the following year on October 14, 1846, Captain Williams succumbed to the same maladies at the age of fifty-seven. At the time it was believed these diseases were caused by disturbing the leaf mold by too much tilling of the soil. Today, we know it is due to the transmission of malaria through mosquito bites and unsanitary drinking water due to poor sanitary conditions (think outhouses next to the well) brought on cholera.



So the legend of Captain Williams continues. You can visit the graves of the Williams Family at the East Delavan Union Cemetery on Theater Road. The Williams family plot is immediately behind the cemetery sign

Photo Credits:

Battle of Geneva Lake, courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society

Williams Homestead, courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society

Capt. Israel Williams Headstone, courtesy of Michelle Bie Love