

SAMPSON WILLIAMS
A FORGOTTEN TENNESSEE PIONEER

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Sampson Williams was born in Laurens District, S. C., on December 2, 1762. He was number 10 of 13 children born to Daniel Williams and Hannah Ann Echols. In 1779, some members of the family migrated to Tennessee. Daniel and Sampson were in the group, and maybe some of Sampson’s brothers came this early.

In 1790, Sampson Williams was appointed the third sheriff of Davidson County, but he did not serve a full term. He was elected in 1792, and this time he served until 1793. A third term was 1793-1794. He was paid on a fee basis for his services, which included collecting debts and administering punishment to convicted offenders.

During these early years in Davidson County, and later in Jackson County, Williams was involved in various Indian affairs. He became famous as an Indian fighter, and he later had some positive relations as a trader with the natives. In 1789, he was ordered to pursue Indians after they attacked James Robertson’s station. With a force of 60 or 70 men, including young Andrew Jackson, Williams marched his men to a ridge on the Duck River. There they discovered that the Indians had eluded them. Williams then chose 20 men to leave their horses and make forced marches on foot to intercept the Indians. The next morning Williams’ soldiers rushed the camp, firing on it from about 60 yards. Completely surprised, the Indians did not return fire. They fled across the river, abandoning their camp and its supplies. Williams confiscated 16 guns, blankets and moccasins.

Sampson Williams’ final fight against the Indians was the famous Nickajack expedition of 1794. A force of 550 men met near Nashville and departed on September 7, moving southeast of Nashville toward the Indian settlement at Nickajack on the Tennessee River south of Kingston. The force divided into three divisions and attacked the village, which was made up of about 200 substantial log houses. Fog and corn fields shielded the attackers, and the surprised Indians fled toward the river. About 55 warriors were killed, as well as some squaws. The village was burned. This military victory essentially ended war with the Cherokees in Middle Tennessee.

By 1791, Williams had become interested in the Cumberland River part of Sumner County that later became Jackson County. His interest in the area was generated by a new road that was completed in 1788. The Avery Trace was a rough trail about 10 feet wide. It was so faint in some places that trees were blazed to mark the path. By the 1790s it had become a wagon road. Operating a ferry across the Cumberland River on the Avery Trace would be a lucrative occupation, and Sampson Williams was influential enough, and fortunate enough, to secure that right.

Williams bought land on the west side of the river, which would eventually be the more important side as the site for the second Fort Blount and the town of Williamsburg.

In 1794, the name "Ft. Blount" was first used to designate the post on the west side of the river. It was named in honor of territorial governor William Blount. In 1799 some visitors indicated that the fort no longer existed. Two Moravian missionaries commented that "at Fort Blount...there had been a garrison; now there remains a roomy house." Fort Blount was never attacked during its time as a military base. Two of the soldiers stationed there were killed by Indians at two different times.

The year that Sampson Williams left Davidson County and made Fort Blount his permanent home is difficult to determine, but 1795 is the most likely date. When Sampson finally moved he brought with him his wife Margaret Young and their five children – Jefferson, Elizabeth, Margaret, Oliver, and Daniel. His brothers Oliver and Wright were also living there in 1796 and 1797 as soldiers in the military unit.

Sampson was a businessman at Fort Blount, establishing himself as a large property owner, a merchant, an inn keeper and a trader dealing with both Indians and travelers. In 1795, a letter indicated that Williams had a contract to furnish supplies to the Indians. In 1804 the National Council of the Cherokee Chiefs allowed Williams and two other men to operate "stands for houses of entertainment" for Indians and settlers. When the stockade fort was abandoned for military purposes Williams may have used the fort buildings for commercial and well as personal purposes.

Williams owned 54 slaves in 1830. Several recorded incidents in his life involved those slaves. William Nickins, a freed slave, settled in Jackson County near Sampson. As a skilled craftsman he made cabinets and spinning machines and "accumulated some considerable funds." Nickins married one of Williams' slaves a purchased her from Sampson.

After Jackson County was created in 1801 activity increased in the Fort Blount area. Four men were appointed as commissioners to purchase sixty acres and lay out the county seat. The town was sited on Sampson Williams' property on the river, and it was named Williamsburg in his honor. Two acres near the center were reserved for a courthouse and jail. This was to be the public square. The courthouse was built of brick by William White, and the jail was constructed of logs. White built and operated a hotel in the town; James Smith built a mill near the town; and Sampson Williams acted as the first postmaster.

Williams was a senator in the general assemblies of 1799-1801, 1805-1807, and 1811-1813. In 1803 he was a severe critic of Governor John Sevier, who was running for re-election. In a letter written from Fort Blount to Andrew Jackson, Williams expressed his bitter opposition of Sevier. He said the governor was "Guilty of Committing frauds on the publick." Some of Sampson Williams' most notable actions, and some of his last, involved the creation of schools in the Upper Cumberland region. Sampson co-operated with Moses Fisk, who came to Tennessee from Massachusetts about 1795. Until 1806

Fisk lived at Fort Blount with Sampson, and in that year the two founded Fisk Female Institute in Hilham. Each man contributed 1,000 acres to fund the school. In the same year the two men founded a second school in Williamsburg – Montpelier Academy. Sampson was a trustee of Montpelier, and in 1835 he was listed as treasurer of the academy.

On February 19, 1841, Williams died in Williamsburg, and he was buried near his home. Although he had been an important personage in early Tennessee history, he was eventually forgotten by historians. Some reasons for this were that in his last years he was not as active in state affairs as he had been. And many of his associates died before he did. He and Andrew Jackson died about the same time. In his later years Sampson had withdrawn from the centers of activity, and he had chosen to isolate himself in the dying town of Williamsburg, which was in very rural Jackson County. Thus time and history passed him by, and his part in the making of Tennessee was largely forgotten.

“Cumberland Tales” is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/forklore of the Upper Cumberland region. Send stories to the editor at History Department, Box 5064 TTU, Cookeville, TN 38505. E-mail addresses are cdickinson@tentech.edu and birdie@tentech.edu

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