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## Joseph Williamson Jr.

By Megan Pinette

October 5 is the 172<sup>nd</sup> birthday of Mr. Joseph Williamson Jr., the man who, as a "labor of love," wrote *The History of the City of Belfast*. All Belfast, Waldo County and Maine historians owe a great debt of gratitude to Joseph Williamson. His 956-page volume contains most of the vital information about his native city and is often used as a model for other city histories. Although it is not exactly a book to be found on nightstands for casual reading, it is interesting enough chapter by chapter.

Williamson was first inspired to undertake the writing of the history as early as 1870 as he prepared a speech to be given as part of the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement of Belfast. He soon found that a few extra years were needed to finish the book, resulting in its publication date of 1877. He begged the forgiveness of his readers that the book took a little longer to finish; he quickly added that the additional 206 pages and engravings would make up for any disappointment.

His first volume has 53 chapters containing such vital information as Physical and Descriptive History, Proprietary History, Municipal History, Educational History, Buildings, Roads and the invaluable Necrology. This Necrology chapter includes listings for all deaths in Belfast from 1770-1874. It begins with the deaths of John Morrison and Thomas Steele, who were drowned on Penobscot Bay while returning from the gristmill at Ft. Pownal and ends with the death of Charles D. Field, son of first Belfast lawyer, Bohan P. Field. The most interesting inclusion with this book has to be the map of the original plan of Belfast, made in 1768 at the time of the purchase by the original proprietors. Some of the boundary lines can still be found on survey maps of Belfast today.

Joseph Williamson Jr. was born to Joseph and Caroline (Cross) Williamson in Belfast on Oct. 5, 1828. At the time of his birth the family was living in the former John Moor house built in 1809, it is now Dr. J. Dutch's Optometry office (#94 High St.). Included in the family were Joseph, Caroline, Joseph Jr., William Cross, George Ralph, and Caroline Cross. They were in this house from 1820 to 1845, when the move to the newly built Greek Revival house was made. Joseph Jr. was 17 years old at the time of the move and was about to enter Bowdoin College.

The Hon. J. Williamson was one of Belfast and Waldo County's preeminent lawyers. He had been born in Canterbury, CT in 1789 and came to Belfast in 1816. Two other brothers also migrated to Maine at this time, including Hon. William D. Williamson who was the Historian of Maine. Hon. J. Williamson was appointed County Attorney for Hancock County court, a member of the State Senate in 1833 and 1834, president of the Senate during that last year. He built 3 "blocks" of buildings on High St. and Church St., including one termed "the fireproof block." His own law office was in a small wooden building at the corner of Main and High St. which he shared with Hugh J. Anderson (future governor). In 1850 the "City Block" (Steam Printing building) was built on this site by James Young McClintock.

Mrs. Anne Royal, who so eloquently described her visit to Belfast in 1827, wrote of Joseph Williamson Sr. She describes him as being "one of the finest looking men in the place and deservedly ranks among the highest. He is quite a young man, a fine figure with a fair oval face, a gay countenance and soft gray eye." Joseph married Caroline Cross of Newburyport, MA in 1824, she was his second wife; his first wife, Mary Huse died in 1822 at age 25. Wife Caroline died in 1852, age 54, leaving her husband and the four children. The Hon. J. Williamson died two years later on Sept. 30, 1854, age 65. He was held in the highest esteem by all who knew him socially and



professionally. At the time of his father's death Joseph was 26 years old and practicing law in his father's office. He had just graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick in 1849.

Joseph Williamson Jr. continued in his father's footsteps and developed into a hard-working country lawyer, well versed in all aspects of the law. Much of his work in this boom time of Belfast and Islesboro real estate was done in thorough Title research. His love of meticulous detail led to his real work of writing history and biography; his first book was published in 1852 when he was 24 years old. Entitled the "Maine Register and Reference book"; it cataloged the institutions, corporations and business interests of the State at that time. He continued to write and publish many articles and contributions to the Maine Historical Society, of which he was Corresponding Secretary. Various other venues for his varied historical subjects were the "Bangor Historical Magazine", "Maine Historical and Genealogical Register" and the "Republican Journal."

In 1870, while preparing an address to be given in honor of Belfast's Centennial, Joseph formulated the idea of compiling an entire history of the city. He had already written a history of Belfast while still a boy, and formed his later book around that writing. Much of the early history notations he used had already been compiled and published by Hon. William G. Crosby in his *Annals of Belfast for Half a Century*.

Joseph married Ada Hortense Peirce of Bangor on Oct. 22, 1857. They had three children; Ada Caroline in 1858, Frances in 1860 and son Joseph in 1869. It seems that in 1860, while living in the larger house on High St., Joseph's younger brother and sister, George R. and Caroline C. were living with them. The census lists 3 women domestic servants as well as the growing family. Ada Williamson died in 1872 of consumption at the age of 37; she and Joseph had been married for only 15 years. He remained a widower for 30 years, moving to rooms in the Field house on Primrose Hill sometime around 1875. From reading the census records I have a feeling that the younger children were boarded out to finish their schooling after he sold the house to Mrs. Timothy Thorndike.

After the publication of *The History of Belfast Maine, Volume I* Joseph continued to write and garner awards and an honorary degree from Bowdoin College. He was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, the American Historical Society, the New England Historic-Genealogical Society, and the Waldo Bar Association. In 1887, he became the first President of the Board of Trustees of the newly opened Belfast Free Library. His great moment came in 1875 when he was elected to the Royal Historical Society of Great Britain. After volume I was printed, he went right to work on a second volume of Belfast History, which was to include years to 1900. His lifelong friend Alfred Johnson published this book after his death.

Joseph Williamson died at age 74 on December 4, 1902 in the Field home with his daughter and friends by his side. His obituary, which appeared on the front page of the Dec. 11, 1902 issue of the *Republican Journal* lists his surviving relatives as three children, six grandchildren, brother William and a sister Caroline. The notice also states that the Library remained closed from the day of his death until after the funeral. The funeral was held in his old home while a severe winter storm was raging outside. For a man who devoted a whole chapter to snowstorms, gales, extreme cold, earthquakes and lightning, it seems a fitting farewell.