Oliver Williams: A History Lesson by Sally Strait

(Part 1: June/July 2009 and Part 2: Aug/Sept 2009) Waterford Historical Society Newsbill

Part 1:

In honor of the Oliver Williams Settlement Project, I figured a history lesson was in order for all of us. We know that Oliver traveled to and settled Waterford on the banks of Silver Lake (which he named) in 1818 and 1819. Here are some facts about Oliver Williams before his travels to Waterford that you may not know:

Major Oliver Williams was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1774. He came to Detroit in 1808, established the mercantile business there, purchasing his goods in Boston, carting them overland in covered wagons to Buffalo, and shipping them by water to Detroit. He ordinarily made two trips a year, on horseback, between Boston and Detroit.

During the winter and spring of 1810-11 he built a large sloop, which he named the *Friends Good Will* to be used for his Detroit merchant business. During the War of 1812 (between the U.S. and Great Britain), and while at port in Fort Mackinaw, Friends Good Will was chartered by the U.S. government. She was to go back and forth from Mackinaw to the garrison at Chicago carrying military stores and supplies.

On the first return trip from Chicago, and unaware that the British had captured Fort Mackinaw (the British had purposely left the American flag flying over the fort), Friends Good Will was captured and Major Williams and his crew were made prisoners. The name of the vessel was changed by the British to "Little Belt," and it formed a part of the British squadron and was captured the next year by Commodore Perry on Lake Erie. At the time of the battle she mounted three guns. She was burned at Buffalo the following winter, having, with two others, been driven ashore by a gale.

Major Williams was paroled at the end of the war and went back to visit his family in Concord, Massachusetts. When he then returned to Detroit to look after his business and property he found Detroit and the entire frontier laid to waste and his property scattered to the winds. The most that he saved from the general ruin was his residence on the corner of Jefferson avenue and Bates, and some twenty acres on Woodward Avenue *(*all of which he later sold when he purchased his farm in Oakland County).

In the fall of 1815 he moved his family from Concord, Mass., to Detroit. His wife, Mary, and eight children traveled with spring carriages and their goods in double covered wagons. They stopped in Buffalo, New York, for three weeks until obtaining passage to Detroit by way of a small schooner. On their Jefferson Avenue property, they opened a successful hotel and boarding house known as the Yankee hotel.

An interesting note was that in August, 1817, President James Monroe visited Detroit and was received with public honors during a procession led by Oliver Williams, then city marshal. Passing the Williams residence on Jefferson avenue, Mary Williams beckoned her husband to dismount and summon Dr. Brown, living next door. In a short time, a son was born to Mary, who they then named James Monroe Williams in honor of the visiting President!

To be continued with the Williams first exploration into the wilderness of Pontiac and Waterford in the fall of 1818.

The above Information was taken from the Michigan Historical Society Records (Volume 8) of their Annual Meeting in 1885 where Ephraim S. Williams (Oliver's son) gave a speech to the meeting about his family history.

Part 2:

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In the last newsletter we left Oliver Williams and family living in Detroit in 1817.

In the fall of 1818, Oliver Williams, his brother in law Alpheus Williams (who would later settle at Dixie and Andersonville Roads in Waterford Village) and others, made a journey to Oakland county on horseback with a French guide. Following the Indian trail towards Saginaw (Saginaw Trail then Dixie Highway), they crossed the Clinton River at Pontiac. After exploring the surrounding country, Oliver selected three hundred and twenty acres of land upon a beautiful lake, which he afterwards named Silver Lake. After an absence of three or four days, the party returned. Their report electrified the staid, quiet inhabitants of Detroit, among whom the belief was general that the interior of Michigan was a vast impenetrable and uninhabitable wilderness and morass.

In the winter of 1818 and 1819 Oliver Williams started with his horses and wagon, provisions and tools, and three men for his new home, to build a house for the reception of his family in the spring. This was the first team and wagon ever driven to Pontiac, taking three days, cutting his road and bridging streams and bad places.

The Williams' house was of hewed logs laid up very nicely, fifty feet long and twenty wide, one and a half stories high, with a shake roof.

In March, 1819, he moved his family into his unfinished yet comfortable house and all commenced to make a farm among the Indians, flies, mosquitoes, snakes, wild game, and fever and ague. Oliver used to say, when asked if the family had the ague, "Yes, we had a little about thirteen months in the year."

(Ague—pronounced "A-gyu": successive stages of chills and fever that is usually a symptom of malaria.)

The family suffered much from sickness, privations and lack of the comforts of life. Mrs. Williams (Mary) lived there six months without seeing the face of another white woman. She was quite depressed until her sister and daughter visited from Detroit, staying a few days to help and cheer the whole family up.

The Indians were kind and very friendly during our sickness, bringing us many luxuries the shape of wild meat and berries of the choicest kind. We found them not bad neighbors.

In the summer of 1820, they raised and finished a large barn, 40×40, which was the first frame raised in Oakland county and which still stood upon the old homestead in a good state of preservation (at least in 1885 when his son, Ephraim, wrote this). Ephraim

was one who drew the pine logs from a pinery, about one and a half miles from the old home, for the finishing and enclosing of the barn. The plank boards and shingles were sawed and made on the place.

Oliver kept a few goods and they traded considerably with the Indians, collecting a good many furs and skins, sugar, wax, etc., which they sold in Detroit, procuring in exchange many comforts they could not get from the new farm.

The road direct from Pontiac to Detroit became, after some travel almost impassable, so wet and muddy to any depth. Oliver purchased a corn mill, which was put up in a tree in the yard; the hopper would hold half a bushel or more. With two cranks his boys would grind out a bushel of corn when wanted, which gave them nice corn meal. The neighbors also came and ground their corn, and this proved a very great convenience to the neighborhood.

“Deer and all wild game were very plenty. We boys became quite expert hunters. I hunted considerable, but for a long time could kill nothing, often having deer stand all around me, distant from three or four rods to ten, fifteen and twenty. I would take the nearest, aim and fire, but could not get one, although I was a splendid marksman--could hit the size of a quarter of a dollar twice out of three times at twenty rods. The trouble was, I was excited, and in sighting a deer I would see the deer's body, and, of course, I would fire above the deer. My younger brothers had killed many, and they laughed at me, to my great annoyance.

I started out one morning early and said to myself, Now, if I get a shot, I will be calm and take time and take good aim, as if shooting at a mark, I will have no more fooling. I had not got out of sight of the house before I saw a deer about twenty or thirty rods from me. I took deliberate aim, drew a fine sight, and my deer fell. Then to get him home. I thought I could carry him on my back, as I had often seen the Indians do. So, I fixed him, got him on to a log, and then on to my back, and started, but did not go far before I backed up to a log and let him off. After a little I started again, but it was no go. I was in sight of the house for which I had started. Such a looking object as I was! I had daubed myself from head to foot with blood and deer hair. Oh, how I looked, but I marched bravely home, for I had killed a deer.

The family were at breakfast as I went in. As soon as my father saw me he and my brother shouted, "He's killed a deer!" Mother, good woman, smiled and said, "Why, Ephraim, how you do look! Just look at your clothes." I said, "Never mind, mother, I have killed a deer." I was then over the buck fever and could kill a deer every time I fired on one. Father took his horse and wagon and we went and brought him in. We never spent much time in hunting, for we could go out an hour or two, morning or evening, and kill a deer.

Our lakes were almost black with ducks, spring and fall. We could kill a mess in five minutes near our house. I recollect father and myself crawling beside a fence leading from the barn to the lake, and, upon his giving the word, we fired together into a flock of ducks near the shore, and we got eleven large, fine, black-neck ducks.

An Indian family by the name of Wa-me-gan lived on the high bank near the house, and were a fine, friendly family. Wa-me-gan started out one morning a-hunting, went in north a few miles, when it commenced snowing. He fell upon an old bear lying under a turned-up tree. We supposed he found and wounded him, and the bear made fight. The old man defended himself, losing his knife and tomahawk in the fight. The bear struck him on the head, cutting gashes with each claw like a blow from a tomahawk, the thumb claw taking out one eye. We supposed this blow knocked him down, then the bear bit him through his legs and arms terribly, and left him for

dead. The old man recovered, went a few steps, set his rifle beside a tree, sat down with his head on his hands and knees, and was found frozen dead. His sons found him, after one or two days search. It had snowed several inches: his knife and tomahawk were never found. The sons followed the bear, but never found him. My brother and myself took the horses and sleigh, and, with his sons, brought him in. He was buried on the farm. This grave was always protected, and I presume it is to this day."

The Williams family had fourteen children, ten boys and four girls. Oliver died in 1834. His wife, Mary, died in 1860. In January, 1884, seven of those children were alive, six being of the eight that came to Detroit in 1815. Two died in California during the summer of 1885.