
Williams, James

(1 Apr. 1825–after 1873),

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entrepreneur and author of a slave narrative, was born John Thomas Evans in Elkton, Cecil County, Maryland. According to his narrative, which is the source of most of the biographical information available about his life, he was born the slave of Thomas Moore, who owned his mother Abigail. When he was a child, he and his mother were sold to William Hollingsworth; soon after, Abigail ran away. One of her daughters, left with Moore, also attempted to escape from slavery but failed. James Williams lived with Hollingsworth until he was thirteen. One day, after being punished especially severely and threatened with sale to Georgia, he took one of Hollingsworth's horses and gradually made his way north to the area around Somerset, Pennsylvania. There he was reunited with his mother, who had married William Jourdan.

Taking the name “James Williams,” he worked several jobs—mostly tied to agriculture—across Pennsylvania in the late 1830s and 1840s and began a peripatetic existence, some of which is described (and some perhaps fabricated) in his narrative. His narrative describes his work with the Underground Railroad during this period and details his claim that he fired the first shot in the September 1849 Philadelphia riot centering on the attacks of the “Moyamensing Killers” on Philadelphia's black population. These events led him to flee briefly to New York. Returning to Philadelphia in 1850, Williams briefly ran an ice cream and fruit business, but continued problems with the law led him to move back and forth between Philadelphia and New York—and even as far as Boston, where he reportedly met fugitive slave and activist William Craft .

In March of 1851 Williams decided to move to California. After a stay in Panama, he arrived in Sacramento in May. He mined with little success, first in Negro Hills and then in Kelsey's Diggings, before working as a hod carrier (a laborer who carried materials to masons) and restaurateur in Sacramento. He there ran into trouble with a slaveholder visiting California—after one of the slaveholder's female slaves left with Williams, the slaveholder confronted Williams at pistol-point—and was forced to leave his business and escape first to San Francisco and then to Mexico. Back in California within a year, he again worked a variety of jobs as a watchman, miner, junk-store owner, and wagon driver. Williams claimed to have been active in the 1857 Archy case, the key fugitive slave case in California during the period, in which Archy Lee asserted his right to freedom arguing that his owner Charles Stovall was a resident of—rather than a visitor to—California. Specifically, Williams's narrative asserts that he helped lead the rescue of Lee when Stovall attempted to move him out of state. Williams then relocated briefly to Vancouver and then to Nevada.

In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Williams continued to work as a miner, driver, and merchant. He accumulated property in both Carson City and Sacramento. In 1865 he sold his Carson City property for a significant profit and returned to Sacramento, where, after an extended illness, he worked

between 1867 and 1869 as an agent of the Sacramento African Methodist Episcopal Church. During this period he also worked as a caterer. Williams provided a large luncheon for Sacramento's 1869 Emancipation Day celebration that was praised by the black press. He moved briefly to San Francisco in late 1869 and then back east. But he soon returned to California and, from 1870 to 1871, he worked as a whitewasher and agent for Siloam Baptist Church in Sacramento, finally leaving this church, too, claiming in his narrative that “as a general thing, amongst the people of color in their churches, you can never do enough” (Williams, 51).

The events of the following year remain cloudy and may represent one of the key reasons Williams composed a narrative. A friend from the East named Elizabeth (“Lizzie”) Thompson supposedly asked Williams to aid her in moving to California. According to his narrative, Williams loaned her money, paid her rent, and “remained her security” (Williams, 52). Thompson seems to have then befriended an Alfred Linchcomb. Soon after, in February of 1872, the house she was renting burned down, and she died in the blaze. Williams accused Linchcomb of both arson (and so murder) and the theft of Thompson's jewelry, but the San Francisco police arrested Williams. Though he was discharged after two weeks in jail, in the words of his narrative, he was “wounded and injured for life in my reputation” (Williams, 55). The black press was especially critical of Williams—referring to him as “Gassy” Williams, sarcastically saying that he had been Thompson's “gallant,” and intimating that he was an accomplice in Thompson's murder after swindling Thompson and her mother. In a letter published in the 30 March 1872 *Christian Recorder, Pacific Appeal* editor Peter Anderson asserted that, prior to the fire, Thompson's throat “had been cut from ear to ear.”

Williams soon sold his whitewashing business and took a job whitewashing for the Central Pacific Railroad, but only a few months later, in August of 1872, he was again arrested, charged in Thompson's murder. Though he was again released, he wanted both to clear his name and to replace his income: “all I can receive for damages” for being arrested, he claimed in his narrative, “is for the people to buy my book” (Williams, 55). That narrative, first published in 1873, was composed of both an autobiography and various stories of other escaped slaves such as Henry “Box” Brown that borrow from William Still 's *The Underground Rail Road*. Williams seems to have consciously pitched the narrative toward white readers, making fairly snide remarks about California black churches and asserting that “be it known, that the Anglo-Saxon race were my best friends through it all” (Williams, 60).

The details of the end of his life remain uncertain, though his narrative went through at least three more editions in California in the 1870s and one in Philadelphia in the 1890s. James Williams provided an important voice among black participants in the Gold Rush and its aftermath.

Further Reading

Williams, James. *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush* (2003), which includes his 1873 narrative.

Beasley, Delilah. *Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1919)

See also

Brown, Henry "Box" <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34263>>

Craft, William <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34324>>

Lee, Archy <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34932>>

Still, William <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34727>>