

# The Ashes of Williams



# Onyville

by Christopher N. Barney

in less than six and five days. That was the unfortunate lifespan of the Williamson Post Office, in Door County, Wisconsin.

The reason for the short-lived office's sudden closing was both tragic and heartbreaking—the two-year-old hamlet of Williamsonville was squarely in the path of the deadliest and most destructive forest fire in United States history, the Peshtigo and Door Peninsula fire of October 8, 1871.

The Williamson family moved to Door County from Oshkosh, Wisconsin around 1869, and immediately set about buying land parcels in and around Gardner Township. The Williamson family consisted of patriarch John Sr.; wife Margaret; eldest son John Jr.; sons Thomas, James, and Fred; daughter Maggie; niece Maggie O'Neil; the wives of John and James, and John's baby.

The family had come to Wisconsin from Canada in early 1869. Shortly thereafter, the Williamsons went to Door County and began purchasing land parcels in Gardner and Brussels townships

for the purpose of constructing a shingle mill and harvesting the virgin timber surrounding it. By 1870, in addition to the mill, they had constructed a boarding house and four dwelling houses. By May 1871, the number of houses constructed had doubled to eight. Additional improvements included a large barn, a general store, a potato patch next to the boarding house, two wells and a blacksmith shop, all of this in a clearing of six to ten acres. Land purchases totaled 600 acres.

In December 1870, the family applied to the United States Post Office Department to establish a post office on their land. Initially named Williamson's Mill, the Post Office Department approved the request on December 24, 1870. The office began operations as Williamsonville on January 3, 1871, in a space somewhere within the shingle mill. Mail was delivered three

times per week on Route 13100, the Green Bay to Sturgeon Bay route. It was evident the Williamson family was in Door County to stay. No one, however, could have known how short a time that stay would be.

The summer and early fall of 1871 turned out to be unusually dry in Northeast Wisconsin, sparking small forest fires in several areas, most due to the careless and wasteful logging practices of the day, which left behind much residue and slash accumulation in the woods and along railroad rights-of-way. Even area swamps had completely dried out, some of them actually catching fire. Drought conditions existed all over the region. Several wells in the area dried up, and the smoke and soot from the numerous small fires in the forested areas created a haze so thick that people were covering their faces with handkerchiefs. Ships in the bay had to blow their foghorns and navigate by compass due to the reduced visibility.

On Sunday, October 8, 1871, a cyclonic low-pressure system in the southern plains began to move towards Wisconsin. A slow-moving high-pressure system located over the Carolinas created increased counterclockwise circulation of the cyclonic low, increasing wind speeds to near gale force over the Upper Midwest. The sporadic small fires in the forests of Northeast Wisconsin were soon to combine into a conflagration of catastrophic proportions.

In the preceding weeks, the Williamson family had been setting backfires in the areas surrounding their settlement, thinking it would protect them from a larger fire overspreading them. It had worked, until Sunday, October 8. That afternoon, Thomas Williamson, twenty-six, had been busy pouring barrels of water onto small fires in the potato patch and other areas, and had his teamster fill several barrels with water from the nearby creek.

Then, in the late afternoon, the southwest wind began increasing to more than fifty miles per hour. Soon after, clouds began billowing in the southwest sky and an ominous red glow appeared in the distance.

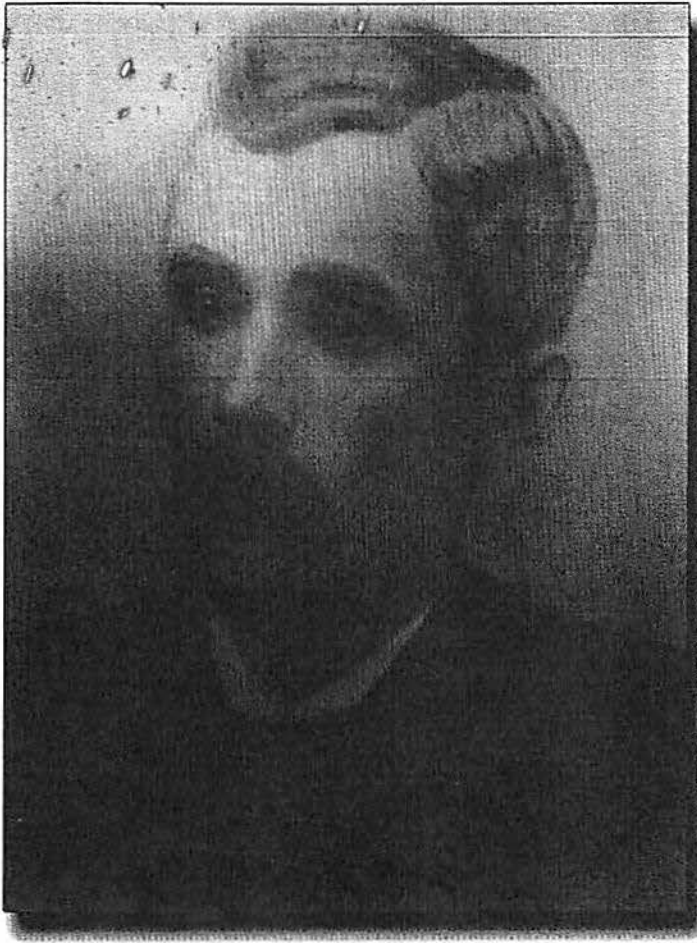
Suddenly, a large, black cloud skimmed over the treetops, felling trees as it sped along. When the cloud reached the clearing of Williamsonville, it exploded in long sheets of fire, falling like a torrent, setting literally everything ablaze—the houses, store, barn, and shingle mill. The mill workers had tried, in vain, to extinguish the structure fires, then gave up and attempted to save themselves. The superheated air accompanying the flames was deadly to those who breathed it in. Many settlements south of Williamsonville were obliterated by the same conflagration, including Brussels.

Before all the buildings ignited, Thomas Williamson had run to his parents' house to get them to flee along with the younger Williamson girls. He eventually got them out and they ran to the potato patch and straddled the ground. Most did not survive. Mother Margaret Williamson had followed the rest to the potato patch but, after seeing a woman burst into flames, moved to where there were a couple of stones protruding from the ground, put her feet between them, and covered herself with her wet blanket. Even though another woman burned to death literally inches from her, Margaret survived. Thomas wound up running through the fire until he found a small square of land which had been cleared. He laid there, face down, while the fire scorched his back and burned his feet, and trees fell all around him. He thought he would burst into flames but did not and fell unconscious.

When he woke up, about three or four o'clock in the morning, the smoke and flame had cleared away. Thomas tried to stand but was too weak. He did not know where he was as every building was gone. An old man 'halloed' to him. Thomas was severely dehydrated and asked the man for water. The man left but did not return. After lying on the ground for a time, he was able to stand and walk toward where the voice had come from. Thomas "halloed" again and someone answered. He went to them and again asked for water. He was given some which was taken from a well, where a man and a young girl lay dead at the bottom. Thomas was so parched he paid this no mind and drank deeply. He later commented that it did not taste like water.

There were a few other survivors there, including Margaret, who had been led there from where she survived the fire. They were laying under what was left of their blankets, for it had gotten quite cold after the fires went out. Margaret asked Thomas if he had seen any of the family—he said he had not and set out to find them if he could. He got Cyril Jarvis to "halloo," thinking there might be survivors in the woods. When Cyril did so, someone answered who sounded to Thomas like brother John Williamson. He called out to the person and asked them if they were John—they said no. Thomas had wandered past many dead bodies, not recognizing any of them due to their badly burned condition, then he walked through the potato patch. There he found the body of brother John, the postmaster. He looked natural to Thomas—both of his shirts were burned off, but not his pantaloons. It is hard to imagine what Thomas felt upon discovering his dead brother, but it must have





been extremely emotional for him. Thomas went back and told his mother of the discovery of John's body. She asked him to take her away from the hellish environment to Sturgeon Bay or at least to an unburned house. Margaret also suffered for lack of water, even drinking some muddy water on the roadside. At the next clearing, all the buildings were burned but they found two horses there, still alive, and Thomas placed his mother—who could walk no further—on one of them. B. J. Merrill, who was walking with them, asked to ride the other horse and Thomas obliged him, then led both horses up the timber-cluttered road. They passed two more burned buildings, a mill and a house, before coming to the unburned house of a Mr. Daily, where they took shelter with six other families. It had taken them from daylight until 3:30 p.m. to make six miles. The next day they continued on to Sturgeon Bay, from where a mule team with relief supplies started out for Williamsonville the following morning, Tuesday, October 10.

The journey was tedious for the relief team and the road was strewn with burned trees and dead birds and animals. As they neared Williamsonville, burnt dead bodies began to appear along the road and, reaching the village, saw an unimaginable and horrifying spectacle. The entire village was leveled by the fire, and burnt dead bodies were scattered throughout, including a cluster of thirty-five bodies piled in the potato patch, where Thomas had found brother John. The relief team found the stench of decaying bodies almost unbearable, owing to the drenching rain which had blanketed the area on October 9—one day too late to save

the fire victims. It was said that the relief team found who they believed to be John Williamson, Sr. He was frozen in a stooping position over that of a child, as he died trying to protect the child from the flames. Precious few survivors were found.

Eventually, fire victims were buried in temporary graves at the site. As many as possible were identified by names and numbers marked on cedar shingles. It is recorded that the remains of Williamson family members were reinterred at Woodlawn Cemetery in Green Bay, although historians give differing accounts on this reinternment. Barb Chisholm of the Belgian Heritage Center believes most if not all of the fire victims were buried where they fell on the site. Given the severely burned condition of the bodies, this seems a plausible explanation. Woodlawn Cemetery records indicate the Williamson family victims were interred there, but even a cemetery representative indicated they are not sure of this fact. On one of the cemetery records, there is a hand-written note that reads "Moved from Brussels?" and so there is apparently no way to prove or disprove the re-interments. In the cemetery, there is a stone marker for John Williamson, Jr., but the other family members are only indicated by what appears to be cedar shingles with initials of the deceased on them. The Wisconsin Historical Society lists Tornado Memorial Park as an "Uncatalogued Burial Site," indicating that human remains still exist there.

It is not known how long Thomas and Margaret remained in the area, but they eventually relocated to Oshkosh, where Margaret died in 1894 at age seventy-five. Margaret also operated a boarding house there. Thomas sold off the Williamsonville parcels in 1878. He married the former Viola Neely in 1874, and together they started a family. Thomas and Viola left Oshkosh about 1887 and relocated to Negaunee, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where Thomas partnered with brother-in-law William J. Neely in the operation of the Johnson Lumber Mill on the shore of Teal Lake near Negaunee. The partnership continued until 1900. Thomas, semi-retired after that, remained available for counsel in the lumber business due to his many years of activity in that field. He was also sought after for his knowledge of timber land and real estate values. Although he was not a man who made friends easily, those who knew him best testify to his kindness of heart. He was suddenly stricken with apoplexy and died shortly thereafter on July 21, 1915, just three weeks after his seventieth birthday. There was true sorrow over his passing. Viola carried on but succumbed to pelvic cancer on May 14, 1921 at age sixty-four. Surviving them were two sons and two daughters, who carried the family line to the present day. One of Thomas' sons, John B. Williamson (1880 to 1956), carried on his father's tradition by founding the Independent Lumber & Fuel Co. in Negaunee. The civic-minded J. B., as he was known to scores of people, remained active in the business until retiring in 1953. He was also elected to the Negaunee Board of Education, serving six consecutive three-year terms, holding all the board offices during that time. The highlight of his period of service was the construction of the Central Grade School in Negaunee.

Christopher Barney

Above: Village founder Thomas Williamson in 1885.

Opposite: The first entrance gate at Tornado Memorial Park, 1943, which was created to honor those who died in the fires of Williamsonville.

The final link to my investigation came on Tuesday, September 24 when I visited Tornado Memorial Park, on the site of Williamsonville. It had been purchased by the Door County Parks Department in November 1927. Chillingly, the site had not been cleared or improved since the 1871 fire. For fifty-six years, its partial foundation remnants, charred stumps, and blackened earth had stood in mute testimony to the horrors visited upon its residents on that fateful October night. By 1937, a park had been created, complete with a gated entrance and memorial plaques. It was an automobile wayside for travelers until recently, when the state highway was relocated and the road passing the park became a county trunk highway.

When I visited the site, my first destination was the memorial plaques, one of which had just been installed in June 2019, showing the names of the sixty souls who had their lives tragically cut short 148 years earlier. After failing to procure state funding, the Friends of Door County Parks group gathered enough funds to have the plaque made and installed. I then walked across the visitor's parking lot to see the restored well site, where five of seven persons had survived the fire.

I then walked the perimeter fence, which separated the landscaped park area from the un-landscaped area beyond. Beyond the fence lay several blackened and twisted tree limbs, interspersed with charred tree stumps. It literally gave me a chill, wondering if it had been left over from the 1871 fire and never cleared away. An overwhelming sense of sadness gripped me, and I closed my eyes to say a prayer for the victims. Knowing that victims are still buried there was also sobering. Finally, I visited the Door County Historical Museum in Sturgeon Bay, where a somber display commemorating the fire was seen.

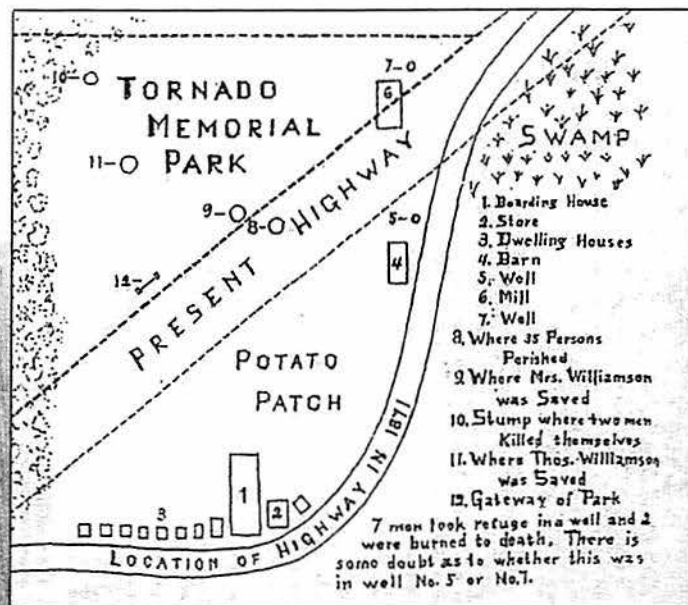
When I left Door County, I had gained a new respect and reverence for what had occurred on that long-ago October night. I also had a sincere admiration for Thomas Williamson, who teetered on the brink of death that night and, despite the overwhelming grief and sadness of losing nine family members in one night, pulled himself up by his bootstraps and crafted a new and fulfilling life—one created out of the ashes of Williamsonville.

### Author's Note

I have been in contact with two descendants of Thomas Williamson: Kay (Williamson) Anttila of Menominee, Michigan and John Williamson of Hampton, New Hampshire. Both are great-grandchildren of Thomas and were enthusiastic supporters who contributed much to this project, for which I am exceedingly grateful. I am also indebted to Roland Koski of the Negaunee Historical Society for Williamson family information, and to Maggie Weir and Ginny Haen of the Door County Historical Museum for their gracious assistance in this endeavor. Thanks must also be extended to Megan Thornton, Nichole Sorensen and Dr. John Richards for sharing their files of the 1994-1995 archeological excavation of Williamsonville done by Dr. Elizabeth Benchley and her staff at UW-Milwaukee. Their findings shed much light on how the residents of Williamsonville lived—and died—in their all-too-short time there. Thanks also to Jamie Ireland of Woodlawn Cemetery for providing Williamson burial records.

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Door County Historical Society

A map of Williamsonville after the 1871 fire.