Passmore Williamson, Westtown's Crusading Abolitionist

by David Walter, Westtown Township Historical Commission

As the Moyamensing Prison cell door slammed shut on Passmore Williamson on July 27, 1855, he surely realized he was a long way from the leafy campus in Westtown where he was born and lived as a young Quaker lad.

With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Northern Abolitionists were challenged to continue their efforts to free human beings – African-Americans held in slavery – while defying the laws of the land. Passmore Williamson stood in the forefront of that effort.

He was born Feb. 23, 1822 to Thomas and Elizabeth PyleWilliamson, in a house on Westtown School's campus, where Thomas was employed as the Bookkeeper/Librarian. When he was five years old, his father resigned from Westtown School. By 1839, the family was in Philadelphia, having transferred to worship at the Friends Meeting of Philadelphia. Thomas and Passmore were engaged as "conveyancers;" that is, they drew up legal papers, such as deeds, to transfer real estate properties.

"Stone House" at Westtown School where Passmore Williamson was born in 1822. His father was the School's librarian/ bookkeeper until 1827.

A young man of strong convictions, at age 20, Passmore joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). At the time, abolitionism was not a popular stand, even in Northern states where slavery was being gradually abolished (according to the 1840 U.S. Census, there were still 64 slaves in Pennsylvania.)

Despite the fact that the state had few slaves, outrage against abolitionists was rife: the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's hall in Philadelphia had been burnt to the ground on May 18, 1838, just four days after it opened. PAS stood for gradual abolition, and was an "all white" group. Lucretia Mott, and more radical abolitionists, in the integrated Anti-Slavery Society, called for the immediate end of slavery. Many of them participated in the Underground Railroad assisting those who had escaped slavery. Passmore joined the radicals and was disowned by the Society of Friends in 1848.

Yet victories were being won in Pennsylvania. In 1847, Pennsylvania passed a law that repealed the privilege of slaveholders from traveling through the state with slave property. In effect, any slaves they brought voluntarily into Pennsylvania were free the moment they set foot in the state. Other northern states followed with such "personal liberty" laws. However, the federal government, through the political power of the Democratic Party and the slaveholding states, passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which vastly expanded the power of the federal government to hunt and return alleged fugitive slaves in every state of the Union. For all practical purposes, this Act nationalized slavery.

It was against this background that Passmore Williamson was drawn into notoriety in July 1855. He was working closely with a free black man, William Still, on abolitionist matters. Williamson and Still approached an in-transit slaveholder, Col. John Wheeler (the newly appointed U.S. Minister to Nicaragua), and his party on the Philadelphia docks. In the party were Jane Johnson and her two young sons, slaves of Col. Wheeler. Still and his friends informed Johnson that she was free by virtue of being on Pennsylvania soil, and they followed Still to freedom. An infuriated Wheeler went to his friend,

Federal District Court Judge John K. Kane, a pro-slavery Democrat, and Kane ordered Williamson to appear, with Johnson and her sons, in court. Williamson truthfully did not know where Still had hidden Johnson, so was unable to comply, whereupon Kane had Williamson sent to prison for contempt, as he had failed to comply with the Fugitive Slave Act's requirements that all citizens must assist in returning escaped slaves to their masters.

In August, Still and his assistants came to trial. Johnson, then living in New York City, testified that she had voluntarily left Wheeler's custody and had not been forcibly abducted as claimed by Wheeler's attorneys. Thus, she claimed, she was free under Pennsylvania law. The jury agreed: Still and his friends were acquitted, but Judge Kane refused to free Williamson from prison.

The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society kept up a drum-beat of publicity, selling a lithograph of Williamson in his cell, and spreading the story throughout the nation. Friends furnished his cell comfortably and visitors were allowed, including Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Senator Charles Sumner sent him a letter, as did foreign anti-slavery societies, and the poet, John Greenleaf Whittier.

Williamson filed a writ of habeas corpus, for false imprisonment, but it was denied by the State Supreme Court.

Eventually, public pressure caused Judge Kane to relent, and Williamson was released on Nov. 3, 1855, suffering some health effects from his 100 days in prison. His suit against Judge Kane for false imprisonment was never settled before Kane died in 1858.

Williamson remained a champion for abolitionism and voting rights for women. However, he was not as far-seeing when it came to financial affairs. Executor of his father's estate upon his death in 1871, Williamson invested some of the estate in speculative ventures that failed, causing two sisters to sue him for mishandling the estate.

Passmore Williamson died, at age 73, on Feb. 28, 1895, and is buried next to his wife, Mercie, and his father, Thomas, in the Friends Cemetery in Upper Darby.

His prison visitors book, designated as one of the "Top Ten Endangered Artifacts in Pennsylvania," is in the collection of the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester.

Westtown was not a stop on the Underground Railroad, but it did send forth an acclaimed champion of human rights and the dignity of all mankind.

Passmore Williamson in Moyamensing Prison, 1855