

The Tale of Peter Williamson

Before I start the tale of Indian Peter I must give a tip of my hat and hearty well done to the city of Aberdeen Scotland. On 11-06-07 the city of Aberdeen pulled back the curtain on a dark part of the cities history. At the Tolbooth Museum in Aberdeen, "Open to the Public" they had re-enactments of a very dark part of Aberdeen's past history.

In the 18th century Aberdeen was a center for the kid-napping of children to be sold into slavery. During this dark time it is thought 1000 children were captured and shipped to the colony of America and sold as slaves on the block. Children from Aberdeen were taken, children from towns around Aberdeen were taken, no child was safe to walk the streets. Many Aberdeen merchants, city magistrates, sea captains and one Walter Cochran, town clerk deputy were involved.

Now to Peter Williamson, young Peter was born about 1730 in the parish of Aboyne. He was the son of crofter William Williamson who had come on some hard times so he sent Peter to live with his aunt in Aberdeen. In 1743 Peter was kidnapped off the streets of the city. Peter and about 70 other children were placed in a building in Backwynd Steps owned by Bonnie John Burnet, an Aberdeen merchant. It is said that William, Peter's father, heard of this and as the children were marched to a ship he tried to set Peter free. William was badly beaten on the dock and Peter was forced aboard a ship called the Planter. All the children were locked below decks ranging in age from 7 to 14. The trip across the Atlantic took 11 weeks. As the ship approached Cape May in Delaware it ran aground, fearing she would sink the crew abandoned ship, leaving their cargo of children to drown. The next day the crew returned to find the ship had not sunk so they off loaded the children, marched them to Philadelphia and sold them to merchants, farmers or anyone with the price. Peter had survived the crossing of the Atlantic and the ship wreck. Many children had not survived the crossing. It is thought 20% had perished in the crossing.

Peter must have had a higher power watching over him, for a man named Hugh Wilson bought Peter. Hugh Wilson had also been an abducted child slave in his youth. Mr. Wilson had been set free when his owner died and he had worked many years to become a land owner. Peter said of Hugh Wilson that he had been a kind man, humane and honest. At the death of Hugh Wilson years later Peter Williamson was set free. Hugh Wilson also left Peter some money, a good horse and saddle.

When Peter turned 24, he married the daughter of a wealthy planter, the dowry for this marriage was 200 acres of land on the frontier in Pennsylvania, in

Berks County. At this time the French and Indian war was starting and all on the frontier were in jeopardy of attack. One day when his wife was away visiting relations, Peter was in his cabin when he was attacked by Delaware Indians. Peter was taken captive tied to a tree and his hands and feet were burned by the Delaware Indians. Peter remained silent during this torture and was allowed to live for his bravery. Peter was again a slave used as a pack horse by the Delaware. After months as a captive Peter slipped away once again to freedom.

A year after his capture Peter finally returned home to his cabin only to find his wife had died two months earlier. With all lost to him Peter joined a colonial regiment to fight with the British against the French and their allied Indians. As fate would have it Peter was captured by the French in 1756 with the British surrender at Oswego, New York. In November 1756 he was part of a prisoner exchange between the French and British forces. Upon his release he was shipped back to England with the rest of the released prisoners. When he reached Plymouth, England he was found unfit for duty because of a hand wound, he was given six shillings and discharged.

Peter at this time had nothing but six shillings and a strong will borne of defeat and victory. At this time he decided to walk back to Aberdeen across the length of England and Scotland by foot. When he got to the north of England at York he was penniless. He started telling his tale to all who would listen. Finally with the help of sympathetic people in York he published a small book about his adventures. He told of children sold into slavery in Aberdeen, he told about the Delaware Indians and his capture by the French. From time to time he would dress as an American Indian and whoop and dance to get customers to stop, hear his tale and buy his book. Peter sold 1000 copies of his book and with the monies from this he would continue his journey to Scotland.

About June 1758 Peter finally got to Aberdeen. His tales of Indians, capture and slavery attracted great crowds and his book sold very, very well. The general public of Aberdeen were horrified by his tale of child slavery. Soon word reached the government of Aberdeen and merchants involved in this dark trade period. A plot was formed by government officials, merchants and others with cause for concern. Peter was brought to trial for selling a book of a "scurrilous and infamous libel" about Aberdeen merchants and government officials. This trial was held by the magistrates tribunal. The outcome of the trial was without doubt guilty. His books were burned and he was placed in jail until he signed a statement that his book was lies and he paid a 10 shilling fine. Upon his release Peter was banished from Aberdeen as a vagrant.

Peter made his way south to Edinburgh which he found much to his liking. He opened a coffee house which was to become a favorite meeting place for lawyers. After a time Peter reprinted his book which was sold in his coffee house and he would tell his tale to all who would listen. Finally many of Peter's lawyer customers convinced him to sue the magistrates of Aberdeen. The case was

heard in the court of session and Peter won his case unanimously. A key piece of evidence was an account book of William Fordyce & Co. which gave exact details of monies spent in shipping child slaves. The date of the record was 1743 and Peters name was in the accounts. In December 1763 Peter Williamson was awarded 200 pounds damages and 100 guineas cost.

Later in life Peter owned a famous tavern in Edinburgh, Old Parliament Close. The tavern sign read Peter Williamson, vintner from the other world. In 1773 Peter compiled Edinburgh's first street directory. In 1776 he launched a weekly paper called "The Scot's Spy or Critical Observer" which was filled with articles and local gossip. Peter also started a penny post and he would have letters and packages delivered. In 1793 The Williamson Penny Post was integrated into the general post office and from this he received a pension. On January 19th, 1799 Peter Williamson died and was buried in Old Calton Cemetery.

When you think you are having a bad day, think of ole Peter Williamson. He sued for his slavery and won.

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