

*In the Shadow of the Civil War;
Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson*

Nat Brandt, with Yanna Kroyt Brandt
University of South Carolina Press, 2007
[Internet Bookselling direct order](#)

This important study is a combination of traditional scholarship and historical fiction technique. Like all marriages, sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. Occasionally it seems to be directed to high school students, or to a perceived general audience at that level. At other times it had me jumping from my chair with the revelations of the lives and genealogies of abolitionists in Pennsylvania. Of course, what causes me to jump with joy tends to be dry documentary facts, most frequently primary sources. That is generally not the habitual pleasure of general readership. The movement back and forth from scholarly writing to historical fiction does move the complex story more quickly. I bought copies for Internet Bookselling from Wal-Mart distributors.

The development is based on the Underground Railroad records of William Still, which begins with the exciting narrative of rescuing Jane Johnson, enslaved to John Hill Wheeler, who was leaving Washington D.C. for Nicaragua as U.S. resident minister, intending Jane to continue to be a well-mannered house servant for his wife. Having persuaded Wheeler to allow her to bring two of her three sons (the third had been sold away), Johnson slips a note to a black waiter on the ship in port in Philadelphia asking for help to leave slavery. She is met on the ship by black and white abolitionists who protect her while she rushes with her children to a hiding place in Philadelphia. One of those initiators is Passmore Williamson, a white lapsed Quaker who is part of the new militant Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society which includes Robert Purvis, Lucretia and James Mott and J. Miller and Sarah McKim. (The authors miss an excellent opportunity by not including the photograph of this group).

Williamson, a Philadelphia businessman, is brought to trial for the rescue. The slaveholder was a former personal assistant to President Pierce. The issue becomes a test for a Pennsylvania law that was passed in response to the Fugitive Slave Law which allowed enslaved people who were brought to Pennsylvania to declare themselves free. Although the prosecution attacks the rescuers, most of whom were unknown residents of the black community, as forcing her, Jane Johnson returns to the courtroom to speak on her own behalf of her desire to be free and initiation of her rescue. She is protected by the District Attorney and Philadelphia policemen, who see that she is great danger of being seized and returned to slavery. If that happened, the state law would become subservient to the federal. Passmore Williamson is sent immediately to Moyamensing Prison for contempt of court, where he remains for over three months.

The time is August (1855), which everyone will recall was the season of the writing of the U.S. Constitution behind stifling closed windows. Philadelphians leave town in August, but the Judge Kane was unable to do so because he was waiting for Williamson to recant and say that he was indeed the mastermind of the rescue—"a white citizen" who should have shown more responsibility. Then the black rescuers—William Still and four others—are on trial on August 29. Passmore Williamson is still in prison, and Jane Johnson returns again to Philadelphia

testify in their behalf. She is protected in her journey by militant women abolitionists, including Mott and McKim. In this case, Judge James C. Kelley dismisses the charges, affirming Pennsylvania law that Jane Johnson was free as soon as she stepped into Pennsylvania with Wheeler.

The jail cell holding Williamson is as notable as John Brown's will be four years later. Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman come to call on the prisoner. Many of the principals involved in the rescue—Still, Mott, the McKims—will be deeply involved with John Brown and with his widow, who stays at the home of William Still for two weeks on her way to Harpers Ferry to visit her husband on the night before his execution.

Three pamphlets at the Library Company of Philadelphia on the case which were published in 1855 are other major primary sources of Brandt's development. There is an excellent online description of the events and these pamphlets at <http://www.librarycompany.org/JaneJohnson/>.

The entire Underground Railroad records 1872 publication by William Still is online, but Brandt cites only an 1886 revised edition (possibly an error intended to be 1883) with a biography of the author. Brandt states that "one of the most serious risks in his life by sheltering a participant in the Harpers Ferry raid—in flagrant defiance of the federal government—he confided to only two persons he could trust, J. Miller McKim and Passmore." (page 161) The endnote goes on with the statement that the raider Still sheltered was Osborne Anderson, and letters from Still were found on [the body of?] John Kagi.

Having been Osborne Anderson's advocate for nearly thirty years, publishing *A Voice from Harper's Ferry in full in 1979 (Black Voices from Harpers Ferry; Osborne Anderson and the John Brown Raid)*, I do concur in one portion of the endnote (an odd place to put such important information): William Still did shelter Osborne Anderson. This is quoted from William Goodridge, an African American businessman in York, who is credited by I. H. Betz in 1912 as sending Anderson through to Still in Philadelphia on his railroad cars. Betz also confirms Still's account of sheltering Frances Meriam, a white raider from Boston who escaped with Owen Brown and could not endure the mountain cold. (*Black Voices*, page 171).

Just when this occurred is intriguing. Goodridge kept Anderson hidden in a stairwell of his building in downtown York (the largest of its day) "for several weeks." Mary Brown, the wife of John Brown who was traveling to see her husband in prison before he was executed, stayed with William Still and his wife in Philadelphia for about two weeks before November 30, when she went with J. Miller and Sarah McKim and Hector Tyndale to Harpers Ferry by train. (see *John Brown's Family in California, Allies for Freedom*, 2006).

The next record of Anderson is in Cleveland, where he meets Charles Tidd and Frances Meriam near the date of December 9, 1859. How long Anderson was in Philadelphia is not known, but it could have been a week or ten days at least. Still certainly would not have hidden Anderson in his home at the same time that Mary Brown was in residence. But he likely made an arrangement at another Philadelphia Underground Railroad safe house. It is no wonder that in his publication of records in 1872 that he states he deliberately did not keep specific ones

during the time of the John Brown raid. He could well have been extradited and hanged by the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This leads to the more problematic aspect of Nat Brandt's statement of William Still's relationship to the John Brown records. a) the escaped raiders were not sought by the federal government, but by Virginia asserting states' rights in the same way Pennsylvania did in the case of Passmore Williamson and Jane Johnson. b) there is no evidence that incriminating letters were found on the body of John Kagi—they were all in John Brown's carpetbag found at the schoolhouse and in his trunk stashed by Owen Brown beneath the floorboards at the Kennedy Farm.

It would be nice if I could neatly tie this up and state that letters incriminating William Still were found in the trial documents transcribed in November 1859 and later published in the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, many found by Eric Ledell Smith of the Pennsylvania State Museum in the Dreer Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. (see *John Brown's Family in California: 24-31*) No such luck. But it is possible that letters with his name were published in the Baltimore papers at the time, because that is where the carpetbag letters first traveled. And, due to the notoriety of Brown and his own association with the black Philadelphians in conspiracy in the summer of 1859 (see Hannah N. Geffert, "Regional Involvement in the John Brown Raid" in *Prophets of Protest*, 2006) it is utterly amazing that William Still sheltered Mary Brown in his own home for two weeks in November 1859, as well as assisting Frances Meriam and Osborne Anderson to safety.

Finally, I would call attention to the Epilogue which severely attacks Lucretia Mott based on a phrase that she put in a personal letter about Passmore Williamson that "it is an old story." Do historians agree that this was disparaging? Or could it be in context of her time and relationship to the recipient?

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