



John P. Williamson

Dakota Images

John Poage Williamson, a Presbyterian missionary whose family served the Dakota Indians for nearly a century, was born 27 October 1835 at Lac qui Parle in present-day Minnesota. In 1847, his parents, Thomas Smith Williamson and Margaret Poage Williamson, workers for the American Board of Foreign Missions, sent him east for several years of schooling. He graduated from Marietta College in 1857 and in 1860 received a degree in theology from Lane Seminary. After serving congregations in Indiana, he returned to Minnesota to begin mission work at the Lower Sioux Agency.

Following the 1862 Uprising, Williamson accompanied thirteen hundred Santee Sioux who had been exiled from Minnesota to Crow Creek, Dakota Territory, where he established a school. In 1866, in response to reports of starvation conditions at Crow Creek, the Indians were removed to a reservation in northern Nebraska. Here Williamson formed a church of nearly three hundred members. In 1869, he moved a few miles up the Missouri River to Greenwood, Dakota Territory, where he became the first ordained missionary among the Yankton Sioux. During his forty-eight years of work there, he also assisted Alfred L. Riggs, a childhood friend from another prominent missionary family, in establishing Santee Normal Training School on the Santee reservation for the education of native clergy and mission workers. In addition, he periodically visited the Santee who had broken from the Nebraska group and settled on the Big Sioux River near Flandreau. As special government agent for this group during the 1870s, he was instrumental in getting government funds for a school and equipment for farming.

Throughout his career, Williamson traveled across Minnesota, Montana, and both Dakotas as a general missionary for the Presbyterian church, organizing churches and counseling mission workers. He lived to see the establishment of thirty-five Presbyterian churches served by more than twenty ordained native ministers among the Dakota. He also produced numerous publications in the Dakota language, including an English/Dakota dictionary, and was an editor of the *lapi Oaye*, a publication of the Santee Normal Training School. In recognition of his work among the Sioux, he received a Doctor of Divinity degree from Yankton College in 1890.

Williamson also took a deep interest in the development of South Dakota as a state, serving in the legislature from 1897 to 1898. He died on 4 October 1917 at Greenwood. His wife, Sarah Vaunice Williamson, and seven children survived him.

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