

# Isaac L. Williams, Artist and Portrait Painter.

---

As the subject of my sketch is not found mentioned in any of the encyclopedias or journals at present extant, it was necessary to collect the data here gathered from relatives and personal friends of him and from the works he left as testimonials of himself and his life, and in my butterfly-bee-like flitting hither and thither for knowledge and information of my story I am indebted to a number of good people of our city, as well as some few of other cities, and to one who has adjourned to that distant city from which no traveler has yet returned (I refer to Mr. H. C. Burrowes, who, just a few days before his last illness, gave me most helpful information and the privilege to examine the portraits of his renowned father and dear mother, as done by Mr. Williams, the subject of our conference and of my sketch. We met him on Grant street, on the pavement of the Woolworth building, as we were just starting on our way to his home. We owe him thanks for information which probably would not otherwise have been received.) I wish to make special acknowledgment to Miss Clark, who accompanied me on my various tours of portrait inspection, as well as for information concerning them; also to Miss Holbrook, Mr. Diffenderffer and Mr. Hensel for help thus received. Mr. Diffenderffer, who knew Mr. Williams personally, and watched him

daily at his work, very kindly gave me his personal recollections. These I shall make use of freely.

If a large patronage is an indication of success, then Mr. Williams was a very great success. In his native city, Philadelphia, many paintings done by him can be found; a great many in the Pennsylvania Historical Society; in Lancaster, I have found a great many which later I shall mention; in England, where he was called by an English nobleman, who had seen and admired his work in Philadelphia, he painted several landscape views, among which is Tom Moore's cottage, now owned and in the possession of the Misses Holbrook in our town.

Isaac L. Williams, without the L., was the real name of the artist. The L was added because of another man of the same name living in his community. To avoid confusion, especially in mail and correspondence matters, the letter L as a middle initial was used by him. Although not born in Lancaster, Mr. Williams was in many ways closely allied professionally to the city and county. Being a native of Philadelphia, however, he does belong to the State, and, as one of his friends says of him, he stands in the front rank, with the pencil and brush, of our Commonwealth's artists. Quoting, the same friend says of him: "He does not come before us with the glamor and prestige of a century or two behind him to proclaim his merits and exact his fame, but presents himself to us in propria persona, as one of us known to hundreds still living, who knew the man, saw him at his work, and learned to esteem him as a man while they admired his skill as it came rapidly into view from his studio."

Isaac L. Williams was born in the

city of Philadelphia, on June 24, 1817. His early literary education was received in a private school in that city. This private instruction continued only until his fifteenth year, when he became a pupil of Mr. Smith, artist, who was at that time considered the ablest teacher of drawing in Philadelphia. So rapid was his progress in this line that his friends induced him to take up the more difficult and higher branch of art, that of portraiture. This he did under the tuition of Mr. John Neagle, a noted portrait painter, who had a large and eminent patronage. Mr. Neagle married the daughter of Sully, the great artist. Some of the early portraits painted by Mr. Williams have been regarded as among the best examples of his style, which closely followed that of his preceptor, Neagle. A copy of one of his portraits, that of Richard Penn Smith, showing to a degree in what regard he was held as an artist, is to be found in Burton's Gentleman's Magazine for September, 1839. The engraved portrait accompanies a biography of Richard Penn Smith, provost of the University of Pennsylvania. The text below the portrait says: "The accompanying engraving is made from an admirable likeness by Williams, a young artist of great promise in this city."

Mr. Williams loved his profession, and was successful in it because he loved it. The beautiful, whether in nature or art, appealed to him, and he lived idealized in its atmosphere. His brush and pencil were never idle, from the day he took up the artist life. In time, too, he became a teacher of his beloved art. For many years he taught drawing in private schools as well as in his studio. He worked very hard, and accomplished the re-

ward of his work. He was the first preceptor of the late Henry E. Abbey, of whom he says, "Young Abbey was an erratic, wayward pupil, who devoted most of his student hours to drawing elfish, impish and outlandish-looking figures on the margin of his drawing books." Abbey was probably gifted beyond the ordinary lot of mortals, and his genius sufficient unto itself, without the irksome routine of books and copy drill. His latest efforts are immortalized in the new Capitol at Harrisburg.

Mr. Williams painted landscapes as well as portraits, and perhaps just as numerously. By many his landscapes are considered superior to his portraits. It was his custom in summer time to make extended tours in search of the beautiful and picturesque. He made journeys along the Susquehanna, the Juniata and our own Conestoga. No doubt, these rambles included the most charming of all rambles to be found anywhere—out the Willow Street pike and Steinman's road; across the fields to Indian Rock and back again by way of Media Hills and Engleside. He would gather wild roses and honeysuckles, daisies and haw and dogwood and barberry and a thousand other things, and probably later in the year, after a warm rain, abundant mushrooms. The Green Mountains, the Adirondacks and the Catskills, Lake Champlain and the rocky islets on the coast of Maine, were well known to him. These he used as studies for landscapes.

His efforts found scope beyond his native country. In 1866, at the invitation of an English nobleman, he visited Great Britain, to paint the country homestead of that gentleman. It was during this visit that he painted Tom Moore's cottage, spoken of be-

fore. He visited France and Italy before returning home, no doubt absorbing the glory and the grandeur in those treasure galleries where the old-time masters are immortalized. He remained in Europe almost a year.

Among the more notable of his historical pictures are the "Castle of Baiæ" and the "Ruins of Cumæ." He also painted a series of views of the historical mansions of Philadelphia. These are what were mentioned as now in the possession of the State Historical Society. They include:

Spruce Street Hall of the Historical Society of Philadelphia.

Washington's Residence, Germantown—1793.

Friends' Alms House, Walnut street, 1729-1876.

Whitefield House, Nazareth.

Sisters' House, Bethlehem.

The Church of "Augustus," at the "Trappe," Montgomery county, Pennsylvania.

Floating Bridge at Gary's Ferry.

Friends' Meeting House at Merion.

Blue Anchor Inn, N. W. corner Front and Dock street.

Friends' Alms House, 308-322 Walnut street.

Widows' House, Bethlehem.

Valley Forge in the Autumn, 1853.

Valley Forge in the Winter, 1858.

Besides these, the society has the portrait of Townsend Ward.

Another of his portraits, in the possession of Hon. Samuel Pennypacker, is that of Mr. Pennypacker's mother.

### **Mr. Williams in Lancaster.**

Mr. Williams came to Lancaster in 1854, with a commission to paint a portrait of the Rev. Father Bernard Keenan, the pastor of the St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. He was known to only a few Lancastrians at

that time, one of whom was his brother-in-law, the late M. D. Holbrook, and the other, Samuel H. Reynolds, of the Lancaster Bar. They introduced him to many of our citizens, who promptly made him feel at home in his new surroundings. His friend, Mr. Differffer, whom I have quoted before, says of him: He distinctly remembers seeing the venerable prelate climbing the stairs that led to the studio every few days until the portrait was completed. During the interval, however, Mr. Williams, who was of a social nature, made the acquaintance of his neighbors on the first floor, and, finding among them some who were also interested in his art, books and kindred subjects, he soon became one of a little group that saw each other almost daily. As the Keenan portrait approached completion some of these friends were asked to take a look at it and express their opinion about it. There was only one opinion, and that was that the face on the canvas was a genuine likeness of the original. This was the view, also, that was taken by the general public when the work was finished, and the result was that a great many of the wealthy parishioners of St. Mary's handed in their names with orders for copies. I have been able to locate only the original of these portraits. Although a thorough investigation was made, they all seem to have entirely disappeared. Mrs. Frank B. McClain retains the original and the only one of these portraits that has been found. The further result was that many other persons had the portraits of themselves, wives and children painted. Among these are two wee maidens, just outgrowing babyhood, well known to us all--one holding a basket, the other her hat filled with flowers, taken

in the style very much in vogue at that time, a short while ago. The one, dainty Miss Flinn, showing even in her babyhood the conquering sweetness which later subdued the stern heart and fastidious eye of our worthy and honorable one-time Attorney General and leader of the Lancaster Bar; the other sweet, grave face was that of Miss Agnes Kelly, patron and saint—both have passed to the great spirit land of the vast beyond.

Mr. Williams' easel was never empty, and what had been intended as a brief stay in this city extended itself to almost a year, with much credit to his reputation as an artist and the equally welcome credit to his bank account. His first visit to Lancaster was not his last one. He had become a favorite with the people here, and they made further demands upon his services, necessitating several later visits. It would be difficult to ascertain after this long lapse of years just how many portraits of Lancastrians came out of his studio. I have been able to locate quite a number of them, but by no means do I think I have found them all. They consist of the following, the most of which belonging to any one family being in the possession of the Misses Holbrook, nieces of Mr. Williams:

Mr. M. D. Holbrook, large size.

Mrs. M. D. Holbrook, large size.

Mr. M. D. Holbrook, cabinet size.

Mrs. M. D. Holbrook, cabinet size.

Two young children of Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook.

Three daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook.

Copy of Tom Moore's Cottage (which I have mentioned before).

Dr. F. A. Muhlenberg.

Frank Muhlenberg.

Mr. Patrick Kelly.

Mrs. Patrick Kelly.

John Murray, a stepbrother.

Isaac E. Hiester.

Mr. Thomas C. Wiley,

Mrs. Thomas C. Wiley.

Mr. William M. Wiley.

Mrs. William M. Wiley.

Mr. Reah Frazer.

Mr. Patrick McEvoy.

Mrs. Patrick McEvoy.

Mr. Isaac Burrowes.

Miss Harriett Burrowes (daughter of Dr. Francis Burrowes).

Dr. Thomas H. Burrowes,

Mrs. Thomas H. Burrowes.

Governor Ritner.

Governor Francis R. Shunk.

Rev. Dr. C. R. Krauth,

Mrs. W. U. Hensel (as a child).

Miss Agnes Kelly (as a child).

Mr. Williams painted the portrait of Dr. Thomas H. Burrowes and that of Thaddeus Stevens in 1856, an arrangement having been made between the two friends that the portraits should be exchanged, Dr. Burrowes keeping that of Mr. Stevens and Mr. Stevens taking Dr. Burrowes. After the death of Mr. Stevens these portraits were re-exchanged. Mr. Stevens' reverting to his housekeeper at her request. I think I must have made the lives of some of our people miserable setting them to work hunting up this portrait from North street, where I was told it could be found, to Howard avenue on the way back. (It has since been found. Dr. Gilbert Parker sent word from Philadelphia that it was in his possession).

Mr. Williams was married at Harrisburg, November 26, 1844, by Rev. Edward Conovey to his cousin, Miss Dorinda Avice Adams. Four children were born of this marriage, twin daughters and two sons. All are dead. Two grandchildren and three



great-grandchildren are living. It is said of him that he was a model family man, devoted to his wife and children and a favorite with little folks wherever he met them. His friend says of him, through the sunshine and shadows of nearly sixty years his recollections wander back to the time of his first appearance in this community. He remembers him as tall and slender of form, wise, witty, with a vocabulary that was wonderful in its copiousness and a voice clear and musical. Genial in disposition and social in his intercourse with his fellow-men; well-informed and easy of approach, he was a comrade well met. As he was then, his kindly portrait still hangs on the friendly walls of memory, unforgotten and unforgettable. Some estimate of the esteem and regard in which he was held by his brother artists in Philadelphia may be had in the fact that in 1869 he was elected to the presidency of the Artists' Fund Society, a position he held for twenty years or more.

Mr. Williams pursued his profession until within a few days of his death, which occurred on April 22, 1895.

Author: Spindler, Adaline Bream.

Title: Isaac L. Williams : artist and portrait painter / by  
Adaline Bream Spindler.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Williams, Isaac L., 1817-1895.  
Artists--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.  
Lancaster County (Pa.)--Biography.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1912

Description: 261-269 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 16,  
no. 9

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.16

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

+++++

Institution Name  
Institution Address  
Institution Phone Number  
Institution E-mail Address