

John Jones Williams in Great Britain

1 Thessalonians 5:21

John Jones Williams has become something of a legend among his descendants. It's good to revere worthy people, but those who write about legends don't always get their facts straight. It's time to let the historical evidence speak for itself, correcting some mistakes and questioning some assumptions that have become attached to the legend of John Jones Williams. Unless otherwise noted, the *Legend* portions of this report come from the following biographies and articles, copies of which are in my possession:

- “John Jones Williams” by Mrs. Marvin Jones and Laveda Williams (*Biographies of Pioneers of Malad Valley*, published in 1954 by *The Idaho Enterprise*, FHL US/Can 979.641 D3w; also available at welshmormonhistory.org).
- “John Jones Williams” compiled by Laveda W. Williams, Margaret W. Jones and Norma South (1965).
- “John Jones Williams” (1974; available in *The James Henry Denning Sr. Family History: Ancestors & Descendants*, compiled by the Denning Family Organization, published in 2004 by Family History Publishers, Inc., Bountiful, Utah; Section III Pg 81-90).
- “John Jones and Jane Emma Merrifield Williams and James Henry and Sarah Merrifield Denning” (*Denning History*, Section III Pg 10-12).
- “Conversion of the Williams Family” (*Denning History*, Sec. II Pg. 6-8; see also Pg. 11-13).
- “John Jones Williams – Biography” by Carolyn Barnes (2005; available at welshmormonhistory.org).

I know there are other biographies that I don't have copies of, including:

- Any number of biographies written for the John Jones Williams Family Reunions from 1911 to the present. For example, on 12 Aug 1911 “Rosanna W. Denning read a sketch she had written on the life of Father John J. Williams, which was very interesting” (John Jones Williams Family Reunion Minutes 1910-1956).
- “Life history of John Jones Williams” by Arthur D. Williams and Vee Ann Williams (11 page typescript; mentioned in *Denning History*, Sec. II Pg. 7, footnote 19).

This report covers the 29 ½ years between the birth of John Jones Williams and his departure for America.

Legend: My great-great-grandfather was John Jones Williams.

History: True, but I've seen no indication in the records of Great Britain that he had a middle name. It's possible that his full name was *John Williams* until he immigrated to America, where he started using his mother's maiden name as his middle name.

The same may be true of his brothers Roderick Jones Williams, Daniel Jones Williams and Samuel Daniel Williams (although in Samuel's case, he adopted his father's first name as his middle name). Other Mormon settlers in the Rocky Mountains seem to have adopted middle names, too – often the mother's maiden name. This is a general impression I've picked up from research in LDS genealogy. I'd be hard pressed to prove it, but maybe someone with more time on their hands could verify the cultural phenomenon or discredit my suggestion. One interesting example, though, is my great-grandfather Azariah Franklin Williams; in *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah* he is called "Azariah F. Jones Williams," Jones being his mother's maiden name.¹

Legend: It is commonly accepted that John Jones Williams was born 12 Aug 1823.

About twelve years after his death (he died 10 Jan 1899) his descendants and relatives started holding annual reunions on or near his birthday. One hundred twenty gathered to celebrate his hundredth birthday on 12 Aug 1923. A biographical sketch was read, and there is no indication that anyone objected to the date.²

History: To my knowledge, John Williams reported his own birth date on two occasions. The first was when he received his patriarchal blessing on 19 May 1855 in Brigham City, Weber County, Utah.³ The handwritten record begins, "A Patriarchal Blessing by Charles W. Hyde upon the head of John Williams son of Daniel Williams & Ruth Williams Born Breakneckshire South Wales August 12, 1823...." This confirms the commonly accepted date.

The second occasion on which John Williams reported his date of birth was on 14 Sep 1861 at the Endowment House in Salt Lake City. According to an abstract of the Endowment House records, John claimed to be born on 12 Aug 1824.⁴ The 1824 date would be persuasive if it weren't for the patriarchal blessing. I would like to examine the original Book D of the Endowment House records to see if the 1824 date was a mere typographical error in the abstract.

Considering all the available evidence, 12 Aug 1823 should be accepted as the correct date.

Legend: John Jones Williams was the seventh of eight children born to Daniel and Ruth Jones Williams.

History: True, although it's possible that there were unrecorded children who died young, especially in the three-and-a-half year gap between Mary Williams, who was christened 28 Jan 1820, and John Williams, who was born 12 Aug 1823.

Legend: John Jones Williams was born on Black Thorne (or Blackthorne) farm, which was either in Llandeilo'r-fân parish or in the town of Brecon, Breconshire, Wales.

History: Not likely. *Black Thorn* is a translation of *Drain-duon*, the farm in Llandeilo'r-fân parish where William Williams, brother of Daniel Williams, lived. I have found no record of Daniel Williams ever living at Drain-duon. Daniel probably lived at Cefn-gwyn until 1805.⁵ In 1813 and 1816 Daniel lived at Brunant.⁶ In 1820 he lived

¹ Frank Esshom, *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah Pioneers Book Publishing company, 1913), p. 383, p. 1251.

² Minutes of the John Jones Williams Family Reunion 1910-1956. Photocopy in my possession.

³ Reference number 72:57.

⁴ Endowment House #657; Book D, Page 36 (FHL 1,262,040; FHL 183,404).

⁵ See my report on Cefn-gwyn, 22 Apr 2009.

⁶ Parish Registers for baptisms in Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire. National Library of Wales.

at Nant-y-gwrdu.⁷ Sometime between 1820 and 1839, Nant-y-gwrdu became a field annexed to Bryn-Melyn farm.⁸ In 1840 and subsequent years Daniel Williams and his family lived at Bryn-Melyn.⁹ These farms are all in Llandeilo'r-fân parish. Therefore, the best evidence shows that John Williams was born in Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire, Wales, at either Nant-y-gwrdu farm or Bryn-Melyn farm. When Daniel Williams left Wales, his brother still lived at Drain-duon (Black Thorn). That could explain how Black Thorn came to be remembered as the home of the Williams family remaining in Wales. This memory seems to have resulted in the innocent, but erroneous, assumption that John Williams and his siblings had been born at Black Thorn.

Legend: John's childhood days were spent with his parents on the farm.

History: Maybe. In Wales it was not uncommon for children to live and work away from home. Because the biography that makes this statement is not entirely reliable, and because the statement would be an easy assumption for Americans to make, I still think it possible that John spent part of his childhood away from home. It is apparent, though, that John was living at home in 1841. The census of 7 Jun 1841 shows the family at Bryn-melyn:¹⁰

Daniel Williams	55 Farmer	born in Breconshire ¹¹
Ruth Williams	60	born in Breconshire ¹²
Mary Williams	20	born in Breconshire ¹³
Samuel Williams	15	born in Breconshire ¹⁴
Roderick Williams	35	born in Breconshire ¹⁵
Ann Williams	30	born in Breconshire
John Williams	17	born in Breconshire ¹⁶
Ann Jones	15 months	born in Breconshire ¹⁷

Legend: John was sent to England as an apprentice when he was sixteen years old.

History: This is difficult to believe when at age 17 he appears in the 1841 census of Llandeilo'r-fân. Might he have been visiting home on a break?

Legend: John was apprenticed for seven years to one of the King's horse shoers who shod the horses for the fox and deer hunts. John had to learn to work skillfully and quickly. He worked diligently and became very proficient in his trade.

History: I don't know who the King's horse shoer was, or where in England the smithy was located. I'm not even sure who is meant by "the King." Great Britain was ruled by Queen Victoria. Her husband, Albert, was called the Prince Consort. Maybe the

⁷ Parish Registers for baptisms in Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire. National Library of Wales.

⁸ 1839 Tithe Apportionment, Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire. National Library of Wales.

⁹ Parish Registers and Census Records of Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire. National Library of Wales.

¹⁰ 1841 Census, ED 15, Bryn-Melyn, Llandeilo'r-fân, Breconshire, Wales, HO 107 / 1368/7, page 5/17 (FHL #464,300).

¹¹ John's father, Daniel Williams, was age 57. Following the directions for the 1841 census, the enumerator rounded his age down to the nearest multiple of five.

¹² John's mother, Ruth Jones Williams, was age 61, so her age was rounded down to 60.

¹³ John's sister Mary was age 21, rounded down to 20.

¹⁴ John's brother Samuel turned 15 two months before the census.

¹⁵ John's brother Roderick, age 35, had married Anne Price four months before the census was taken.

¹⁶ John was age 17, two months from his 18th birthday.

¹⁷ Ann Jones might have been a relative of Ruth Jones Williams.

blacksmith was a *former* horse shoer for Victoria's predecessor, King William IV, who died in 1837. Or maybe the word *King* should not be taken so literally, and we should simply understand that John's master was a horse shoer for the royal house. It might be interesting to look into the royal records. If apprenticeship records have survived, we might discover more about John Williams.

Legend: John returned to Wales at the end of his apprenticeship.

History: If he began his apprenticeship in 1841, he would have returned to Wales in 1848, when he was 24 years old.

Legend: John stood 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a fair complexion, blue eyes, and black, curly hair.

History: His photo with his second wife, Mary Jones, which must have been taken in about 1857, reveals that John was quite handsome with short hair and a mustache.¹⁸

Legend: John was engaged to a beautiful young woman, but she broke the engagement when John joined the Mormon Church.

History: John probably became engaged between 1848 and 1850. By 1850 John had moved to Trevechin parish, Monmouthshire, Wales, where he worked as a blacksmith.

Legend: He was baptized in January 1850.

History: The records indicate that he was baptized 11 Feb 1850 in Pontypool, Trevechin parish, by Jonathan Thomas.¹⁹ It's possible that this was Jonathan Joshua Thomas, branch president at Trecastle, Breconshire, mentioned in the diary of John Evan Price. He was apparently a friend of the family, and he might have traveled to Pontypool to convert or baptize John Williams.

Legend: The biographies say nothing about John Jones Williams in the year 1851.

History: The 1851 census shows John Williams as an unmarried blacksmith, native of Breconshire, age 27, lodging in the household of Thomas Howells, Bridge Street, Pontnewynydd, Trevechin Parish.²⁰ Also in 1851, John Williams was ordained a Mormon Elder.²¹

Legend: He worked as a tracting Elder and was instrumental in converting his father's household.

History: This is questionable. John Williams might have distributed tracts when he wasn't working as a blacksmith, but by the time he became an Elder, his brother-in-law John Evan Price had already converted most of the family. John Williams was among the last of his family to join the Mormon Church.

Legend: John Jones Williams converted James Denning and his wife Sarah Merrifield Denning. He baptized them either on 5 Jan 1850 or 5 Jun 1851.

History: Since John Williams was baptized on 11 Feb 1850, it's probable that the Dennings weren't baptized until 5 Jun 1851. Poor record keeping could account for the incorrect date of 5 Jan 1850. The months *Jun* and *Jan* could easily have been confused, especially when abbreviated and written in cursive. Also, as we've already seen, it's easy to explain the discrepancy of one year. At any rate, James and Sarah

¹⁸ *Denning History*, Section III Pg 89.

¹⁹ *Denning History*, Section II Pg 7. Their citation is: "Pontypool LDS Mission Records, *Records of Members 1848-1857* (Salt Lake City: Archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints...)."

²⁰ 1851 Census, Trevechin, Monmouthshire, Wales, District 2k, page 17 or page 221 ½ (FHL #104,188).

²¹ *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah*, p. 1251.

Denning were members of the Mormon Church in Abersychan, Trevethin parish, and they were good friends of John Williams.

Legend: Sarah Denning had a sister named Jane Emma Merrifield, who was baptized on 21 Sep 1851. John Jones Williams married Jane Emma Merrifield on 14 Feb 1852.

History: The wedding date appears to be one day off. According to the parish registers, It was Sunday, 15 Feb 1852, when John Williams married Jane Merrifield in Trevethin parish.²² Both the bride and the groom were living in Pontypool.

Legend: Jane was born 4 Nov 1833 near Bath, Somerset, England.

History: Jane, almost eleven years younger than John, was born 4 Nov 1834²³ and baptized in the Parish Church 29 Dec 1834.²⁴ At the time of her baptism her parents – Uriah and Jane Merrifield – lived at Charlton, Kilmersdon, Somerset, England. John was age 28 when he married Jane, age 17.

Legend: Uriah and Jane Denning Merrifield disinherited their daughters Sarah and Jane when they married Mormon boys.

History: This statement requires examination: (1) James Denning was not yet a Mormon when he married Sarah Merrifield on 8 Jul 1849.²⁵ (2) Jane Emma Merrifield was already a Mormon when she married John Williams on 15 Feb 1852. (3) Jane was so young that her marriage may have required parental consent. (4) Disinheritance does not necessarily imply disappointment, anger or persecution. Trusting his sons-in-law, Uriah Merrifield might have calmly removed his married daughters from his will, in order to better provide for his widow and unmarried daughter. (5) Even if the Merrifields were upset at their daughters, they got over it. In 1860, 1872 and 1879 Uriah Merrifield wrote letters to Sarah Denning and Jane Williams, practically oozing with love and kisses.²⁶ In 1879 he wrote, “I received your letter safely and am happy to hear you are doing well.... Your mother and I have prayed for you hundreds of times since you left, and I hope and trust that you pray for me ... and believe me ever / Your affectionate father / Uriah Merrifield.”²⁷

Legend: Both couples sailed for America.

History: At that time the Mormon Church encouraged its members to leave their various nations and gather in Salt Lake City.

The Church had grown rapidly in Trevethin parish. One of the Elders in Pontypool was a wealthy baker named Christopher Arthur. He was the “second heaviest stockholder in the Deseret Iron Company.” His funds were “lavishly spent in giving to the Elders,” and “he also paid emigration fare for forty persons to Utah.”²⁸ Among those forty persons were James Denning, Sarah Denning, their two-year-old daughter Sarah Jane Denning, their infant son James Henry Denning, John Williams and a very pregnant Jane Williams.

²² Trevethin, Monmouthshire, Parish Register, Marriage #246, dated 15 Feb 1852 (FHL #2,408,879).

²³ According to *Denning History* (Section III Pg 10; Section III Pg 87), Jane Emma Merrifield was born 4 Nov 1833. However, other records, including *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah*, show that she was born 4 Nov 1834.

²⁴ Baptismal Records of Charlton, Kilmersdon, Somerset, England (FHL #1,526,662).

²⁵ Marriage Records of Abersychan, Monmouthshire, Wales.

²⁶ *Denning History*, Section I Pg 15-18; 21-22; 27; Section III Pg 73-74.

²⁷ *Denning History*, Section I Pg 16-17.

²⁸ Andrew Jenson, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, p.186.

On 8 Feb 1853, just before their departure, John Williams received an Elder's Certificate, and Jane Williams received a Member's Certificate, showing that they were in good standing at the Abersychan Branch, Herefordshire Conference, of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The certificates served as evidence to be shown to the presiding officer of the branch where they desired to relocate.²⁹

The Williams and Denning families went to Liverpool, England, where they boarded the ship *International* with Christopher Arthur's family on 11 Feb 1853. The ship left dock two weeks later, on 25 Feb 1853, and waited for favorable winds. On 28 Feb 1853 they set sail for America.³⁰

Legend: On the fourth day, while they were sailing on the Irish Sea, a baby girl was born to John and Jane. They named her Elvira Ann, and she received special attention on the ship because she was born with two teeth.

History: That was the fourth day from leaving dock. Elvira Ann Williams was born 28 Feb 1853 on the Irish Channel.

So John Williams and James Denning, with their young, toothy families, left Great Britain behind, eager to build a New Zion in the Rocky Mountains of North America. Their stories will be continued.

As shown on the following chart, I am a great-great-grandson of both John Jones Williams and James Denning:

Daniel Williams 1783-1870	Ruth Jones 1779-1868	Thomas Jones 1799-1874	Ruth Thomas 1805-1899	Henry Denning 1792-?	Martha Nicklas 1789-1868	Uriah Merrifield 1799-1884	Jane Denning 1793-1879
John Jones Williams 1823-1899		Mary Jones (second wife) 1837-1913		James Denning 1829-1898		Sarah Merrifield 1832-1900	
Azariah Franklin Williams 1857-1926				Elizabeth Merrifield Denning 1866-1945			
John J Williams 1902-1962							
Duane Howard Williams 1935-living							
Kyle D Williams 1959-living							

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²⁹ Photographs of these certificates can be seen in *Denning History*, Section III Pg 124,125.

³⁰ The passenger list is microfilmed in FHL #025,690. There were 425 Latter-day Saints aboard.