

In a Carpenter's Own Words

Letters of Seth Williamson, 1810-1835

by Edward B. Fix

Only an exceptional life left testimony enough for a full biography and the most exceptional of men often left no clue to their inner thoughts.

HISTORIAN KENNETH LOCKRIDGE¹

Seth Williamson was not an “exceptional” man, and there is no biography of him. Threads of his life surfaced in a few public records: a marriage listing in a church archives, some real estate transactions, a pension application after the War of 1812, a short probate will, and a cemetery headstone telling of his birth in 1782 and his death eighty years later.² However, in a lifelong correspondence with his younger brother, John M. Williamson, Seth left in letters a descriptive expression of his thoughts, feelings, and observations on his life. These personal letters present a revealing chronicle of life as a tradesman in early-nineteenth century America.³

Seth Williamson was born into a family of carpenters in post-Revolutionary Long Island, New York. His family tradition predestined a life as a tradesman. Seth's father, three uncles, and paternal grandfather, along with a number of cousins and subsequent generations of relatives, were carpenters. In fact, Seth's Uncle David's family produced at least four generations of carpenters. Seth's family resided in Stony Brook where his father, Jedidiah, built a prosperous carpentry business.⁴ Seth's boyhood was spent alongside his brother, John M., going to school and serving carpentry apprenticeships under the thumb of their father. Seth made carpentry his life's vocation but his brother, intrigued by education and politics, followed a different path and made his living teaching school and serving in various distinguished government positions.⁵ However, it is worth noting that John M. never forgot his roots; in his later years, he listed his occupation as “carpenter” in the federal censuses.⁶

Shortly after his marriage in 1805, Seth and his wife, Catherine, left Long Island and moved up the Hudson River to Scotchtown, New York, a small hamlet outside the county seat of Goshen in Orange County.

It was here, in 1808, that he purchased twelve acres of land and pursued his livelihood of carpentry.⁷ Six children—Jane, James, Maria, Lettyann, John, and Harrison—were born in Scotchtown to Seth and “Caty” and four lived to adulthood. After his wife's death, Seth remarried but had no other children. It was also in Scotchtown where Seth remained throughout the period of letter writing to his brother. John M., on the other hand, resided primarily in his birthplace of Stony Brook, Long Island, alongside most of his immediate and extended family. When serving in the state legislature in Albany, he often visited Seth on his way home down the Hudson River. John M. died a bachelor at the age of ninety in 1878 and was the last of those living who helped rebuild the town's church after a devastating fire in 1811.⁸

Seth wrote many letters to John M. over the course of his life. Thirty of them survive and comprise the middle years of Seth's life from age twenty-seven to fifty-four. The letters begin in 1810 with four of them in a five-year span. No letters were uncovered from 1815 to 1820, but twenty exist from 1821 to 1832 with at least one every year and most times two or three. The final five letters, dated 1835, gain more context by the addition of three other letters to John M. from Seth's two daughters and son-in-law. All of Seth's letters run from one to two pages and begin with “Dear Brother” and often sign off with “Affectionately” or “Your Brother.”

The thirty letters, when woven into a thematic pattern, provide an insightful picture of Seth Williamson's world. Many themes run through the letters, one being the dynamics of community—work, family, communication, and observations. A second topic reveals a consequence of emigration, the isolation associated with leaving the home soil and establishing roots in a new locale. A final subject explores sickness and death, and their ravaging effects on individuals and family.

Traditionally, skills of a given trade were transmitted from father to son thereby forming the backbone of the apprenticeship system. Seth Williamson

learned the trade of carpentry from his father, Jedidiah, and was one of six apprentices listed in his father's account book.⁹ He served a seven-year apprenticeship and practiced the trade throughout his lifetime. Seth, in many of his letters to John M., described his work and, on occasion, asked his brother to join him for a season:

I have plenty of work engagd for the ensuing season. If you had come up this winter I would employd you this summer. I have one house engagd to finish for which I get the sum of 325 dollars cash paid in hand when the job is compleated and another small house for which I have 70 dollars besides other small jobs which if God spares my health I hope to compleat.

I have built a new school house at Scotchtown since harvest. I finished it about a month ago. It is 20 by 26 and completely finished. I am very much hurried with work at Mr Houstons by the meeting house where Conor kept a tavern last winter. If I can get through with my work in season to come to Long Island and return before the vessels is done running from Newburgh I expect I shall come and see you all.

I want to come down and see you all but I dont know when I can get time. I am in hopes I can come in the fall. I have plenty of work but wages are very low. I have taken a job of a house and barn for Denton Mills this summer and a small house for Major White. I can inform you that my business is plenty of hard work. I have been very healthy this spring and workd very hard. I am building a house and barn for Mr Joseph Slaughter.

At times, injury and illness significantly impacted Seth's work. In one instance, he "got a fall through the poles on to Esq Morisons barn floor which broke two of my ribs and injured my hip.... There was 4 or 5 days after my fall which I could not help myself." On three other occasions, Seth wrote:

I am lame that I cannot work....I cut my ankle with the broad ax on Tuesday the fifth last and on the Monday following I thought it well enough to go to work. I workd that day and whether I took cold in the wound or standing on it inflamd it. I cannot tell but it paid me very much that night and swelled very much. I have not been able to work since but I am in hopes I can in a few days.

I have been quite unwell this spring with a bad cold but I am in hopes I will got over it. I cought a bad cold on the thirteenth of March last. I was ex posd in water fixing a saw mill till 12 O Clock at night. I was affraid that the cold seated so hard on me that it would lead to a consumption [tuberculosis] but I work now and my lungs appears to get more sound.

I cut my shin a few weeks ago but it has got well. Short time after father left here I had a severe turn of cholera mortus and I have not felt as well since. I lost a profitable job by being sick. My employer could not wait for me. He was under the necessity of having his work going on and he had to get another head workman. I am not able to work steady now.

Seth's ledger book of his business did not survive, and therefore it is not known whether he employed any apprentices. However, in one early letter, he remarked that "I have been very much drove with business this summer. Harvey and I have earnd about 200 dollars since you were here last spring." Perhaps, Harvey was an apprentice; all evidence suggested that neither son of Seth's followed in his father's foot steps. Seth explained the reason for his oldest son not entering the carpentry trade:

John on the eighteenth of January fell with an ax in his hand on the ice and cut off three of his fingers on his right hand close up to his hand excepting a little skin on the under side (of) his little finger and the two next to it. My wife kept the fingers as snug together as possible untill I could go to Scotchtown and get the Doct. He sowed them on and put a thin piece of a shingle on the inside of his hand to support the fingers and applied sticking plasters to the upper side of his fin-

Table I

Family of Seth Williamson			
RELATION	NAME	BORN	DIED
	Seth Williamson	1782	1863
Brother	John Moubray Williamson	1787	1878
Wife (1)	Catherine Stanbrough Williamson	1784	1825
Wife (2)	Julia Smith Williamson	1784	1835
Daughter	Jane Harriet Williamson	1807	1823
Daughter	Maria Williamson Smith	1811	1872
Daughter	Lettyann Williamson Robinson	1814	1842
Son	John Moubray Williamson	1818	1900
Son	James Hervey Williamson	1821	1822
Son	James Harrison Williamson	1825	1878 (after)
Son-in-law	Theophilus H. Smith	1809	1881
Father	Jedidiah Williamson	1757	1837
Mother	Charity Moubray Williamson	1759	1787
Stepmother	Sophia Satterly Williamson	1766	1847

gers. They are very near healed up now but I am afraid he will never have very good use of them.

Family played a huge role in Seth's life (Table I). Like his father, Seth suffered the death of his spouse at an relatively early age and the reality of being left alone with young children to raise. Catherine died in August 1825, and a couple of months later, Seth notified John M. that "I have a Mrs Smith keeping house for me, a very tender hearted fine woman among children." Within a year, another letter cautiously announced his marriage to Julia Smith:

I suppose you have heard before this that I have taken another companion. Whether I have made a wise choice or not time must determine. I was under the absolute necessity of marrying again or breaking up house keeping. My girls was not old enough to take care of business and hiring house keepers will not do....

Seth appeared particularly close to his second daughter, Maria. In the same letter as above, he continued on about a visit from his half-sister and brother-in-law from Stony Brook:

Jonas and Nancy was up to see me and I let Maria go to the Island with them. I expect you have seen her before this time. I should not have let her gone but Nancy said you was coming up in a short time and I thought she would have company back....I set no time for her to return but I told her not stay untill the weather got very cold.

A month later Seth wrote John M. irritated that Maria had yet to return to Scotchtown:

I am very much disappointed in Maria not returning with Mr Hawkins daughter and still more surprisid in finding in your letter that she wishes to stay all winter. I don't want to say she shall come back but it is my wish that she would. She left home very suddenly and very poorly prepared to stay all winter having none of her winter dress with her. I don't expect that her friends will be willing to provide much for her without being paid for it....We need her help at home.... Another objection to her staying is that she is quite young and has no judgement to know what is for her best good. My wife is very much disappointed in her not coming home. I think she will be kindly treated by her step mother. If I thought she would not I could not urge her to come back. Her mother is quite cast down in finding your letter that she wishes to stay. She feels quite lonesome my being gone from home so much and nobody but Lettyann for company.

I feel myself able at present to clothe her well and see that she is well treated.

Later in the same letter Seth explained his underlying reason for having his fifteen-year-old return home, in context of the death of his wife the year before and his oldest daughter three years prior.

I think her a very obedient fine child and I miss her company very much. Loosing Jane and her mother makes me miss her company still more although I have another companion which is very kind to me yet my children appears very near to me...it seems hard to have her so far from me. But as we must be parted some time or other I ought to reconcile myself to it.

Six years later John M. received a letter from a proud father:

Maria was married on the 22nd day of February Washingtons birthday to Theophilus H. Smith my wifes son. He lives at Milford, Pennsylvania and is in partnership with Foster and Broadhead in the saddle and harness making business. He is a young man about 23 years of age and of an unblemished character and I understand very industrious and is doing very good business.

A couple of years later, Seth continued to be impressed with his son-in-law:

Theophilus H. Smith has bought a lot in the village and built a very convenient and comfortable house and I believe will do very well if he has his health. He don't take any kind of spirits and is very much respected by all his acquaintance.

John M. also received occasional news about Seth's other children. Lettyann left home for New York City to learn the millinery trade and years later her father mentioned that "I brought Lettyann home that day her time of apprenticeship expired on that day." Seth proudly commented that his ten-year-old son, "Harrison is the smartest boy of his age I ever saw. He is admired by all my neighbors as such." Seth spent more time telling John M. about his oldest son, and John M.'s namesake nephew, who had moved to Milford to serve an apprenticeship:

My son John has been to see me while I was sick. He appears healthy. He likes the tailors trade very well and likes his boss and his boss likes him. His boss Mr Hagerty is a real business man and the first rate tailor....John I understand is quite serious inclind. I understand he leads in prayer in their meetings. John I understand is quite active in learning the tailors trade.

Communication between communities in early-nineteenth-century America relied primarily on written correspondence and the ability to travel from one place to another. Seth's letters often contain a few sentences on the peculiarities of the "mail," who carried it, how it got there, and how it was delivered:

I received your letter...it was advertised in the Goshen paper last Tuesday and I was so drove with work that I could not go after it untill Friday evening....I have not been to the post office this summer before I went after the letter. I wish for the future you would direct your letters to be left at Goshen post office and I can send every week by the post rider for them. Monels post office is out of the way for me to get them. They generally lay there untill they are advertisd.

I have an opportunity of sending you a few lines by Jonas Hawkins and I thought I had better embrace it. I thought it was almost time to write unto you. Please to excuse me for not writing to you while you was at Albany. My not living near any post office and missing all private conveyance was the reason why you did not receive any letter.

I was talking a few days ago with Mr Charles Mills. He told me he calculated to go on to the Island shortly today. I see him at meeting and he told me he expected to start on Tuesday. Such a favorable opportunity offering I thought it would be wrong for me to be so lazy as not to send you a few lines.

It is apparent in Seth's letters that Orange County was "home" to a number of other Stony Brook natives. Travel appeared to be fairly constant between the two areas and Seth often referred to various modes of early-nineteenth-century travel:

I wish you would get up a horse and put on a saddle and bridle and give father an invitation to mount the horse and head him this way. I think I should have the satisfaction of seeing him here.

I went down to Newburgh yesterday. The sleighing was very good down in the morning but it thawed considerably yesterday and I had quite poor sleighing for eight miles this side of Newburgh comeing home.

I calculate some if my health will admit to come and see you the first run of boats from Newburgh but dont make too much calculation on it.

If this letter gets to Long Island before you leave Long Island I wish you would come from New York to Milford. The stages arrives every evening in Milford from New York. I dont know which way to

advise you to come from New York to Milford whether to come in the steam boat to Newburgh or the other way. There is stages runing from Newburgh within seven miles of Milford and I understand the Kingston Stages will bring the passengers on to Milford. You can inquire in New York which will be the best way.

The dynamics of the community also revolved around incidents and observations recorded by Seth and relayed to John M. One significant event was the War of 1812. Seth's father participated in the Revolutionary War and escaped across the sound to Connecticut when the British occupied Long Island.¹⁰ This patriotism was passed to his son and surfaced in an early letter:

I hope you will keep in remembrance the blood that was spild in redeeming us from the tyranical yoke of Great Britain and let the blood boil in your veins think of the barbarity of the British Government towards our frontier settlements. At the present day they give six dollars a scalp for American either man woman or children. May the vengeance of Almighty God overtake them in their mad career and put a stop to such inhuman acts of violence.

A year later, Seth noted that "the inspectors made all the old Tories take the Oath of Allegiance before they could vote." Soon after another letter joyfully announced:

Probably you have heard of the victory gaind on Lake Erie by Comodore O. H. Perry's squadron. When the news arrivd at Newburgh the Federal party and Republican party joind and kept a day and night of rejoicing. Every house in Newburgh had as many candles burning as there were panes of glass in the house.

Seth was never too far removed in mentioning politics to his brother, the professional politician:

The Bucktails has carried the day in this county. I have not heard yet how it has gone through the state. I saw Colonel Woodard at the election and he talks he had got acquainted with you at Albany. He said you was a plague of a good Bucktail and he desired me if I wrote to you to give his respects to you.

And it wasn't out of Seth's character to ask for a political favor:

I am requested by my neighbors to write you to do all you can for us to prevent the town of Calhoun from taking any more of our town. It will be very injurious to us to have any more taken of. I wish you would do all you can to prevent them from taking any more.

Once in a while, disasters occurred and impacted not only Seth's hamlet but also the surrounding communities. His recording of a terrible ship accident reinforced the risks involved with travel:

A melancholy affair happened in the North River on Tuesday the 23rd day of November last. The sloop Neptune, Capt Halstead, on her passage from New York to Newburgh and when about a mile and a half above West Point was upset by a flow of wind and being heavy loaded with plaster sunk immediately. The number of passengers on board by the best information I can get was about fifty and upwards of thirty were drowned. . . . There was but one woman saved out of eleven or some. . . . I will give you a list of those drowned of my acquaintance [nine named]. The rest of those that were drowned I am not acquainted with.

Seth also wrote at great length about other happenings such as his purchase of additional land and a search for a teaching position for John M. in the Scotchtown area. The most unusual was the appearance of a natural phenomenon, a falling star:

On Saturday evening last I have been out on business and on my return within about a mile and half of home I was looking down to my horses feet in order to pick the best of the road. I was startled with a dazzling light which excludes anything I ever saw. I looked up in the air toward the north and saw a ball of fire in appearance six inches in diameter with a tail appearing four rods long the ball darting in a western direction. In about a minute the ball extinguished but the tail I think I could view much as eight or ten minutes. My wife and Jane was up at home with a candle burning in the room and the moon shining bright and the light darted into the room so bright that they thought the house or barn was on fire. It was about 10 o'clock at night when it appeared.

It is not known why Seth and Catherine left Long Island for Orange County shortly after their marriage. Historian Kenneth Lockridge described such a transition. "For every lure that urged a man to leave town there was a force which held him there. In the days before the telephone and the airplane, anyone who left his home and family was likely to lose all contact with them for long stretches of time. To emigrate might mean abandoning the old climbing oak, the hearth, relatives, and childhood friends—all the small town familiarities. It also meant leaving the only sure source of care in time of need, one's family and one's native town."¹¹ Many of Seth's letters mirrored this feeling, a

sense of isolation from his family and native community:

We think very strange we dont receive any letters from any of you. I wish you and the rest for not to be sparing of your letters. Put them in the post office and they will soon come. Me and my wifes respects to father, mother, brother and sisters and all inquiring friends.

I wish you would write to me and let me know what has happen extraordinary since I have heard from the Island. I want to see you all. I long to see my aged father which according to the course of nature cannot remain long in this present evil world.

I received your letter dated December 17th last evening and I am surprised in its being so long coming. . . . I had calculated you had all forgot me. This is the first line I have received from any of you since my wifes death. Dear brother I never knew what trouble was before. I made great calculations on your calling to see me when you went to Albany but I was disappointed and your letter you dont calculate to call and see me on your return. If ever I wanted to see my friends it is now. Do call and see me on your return from Albany. I am here in a strange land neither father, mother, sister nor brother. I am confind with my family. . . . I am almost discouraged. I am afraid I cant make square work and keep my family together but it will not do to give up.

When this letter was written, Seth had lived in this "strange" land for almost twenty years.

Illness, disease, and death were constant factors in Seth's life. There were very few letters that did not have at least a reference to the health of the family and community. Many letters provided a picture of battles people fought with sickness. The hopes and worries associated with various maladies played on the psyche and disrupted family and community cohesion:

I embrace this opportunity to inform you that we are all at present in tolerable health but [I] have been considerable unwell this winter afflicted very much with a pain in my breast occasioned. I expect by some strain and sudden cold setting in but I am in hopes it is waring off. . . . It is considerable sickly and a great many deaths with the spotted fever [typhus or meningitis].

I thought I would send you a few lines to inform you that through the blessings of providence we are all in tolerable health at present. John was very sick last March occasioned by worms and a heavy cold. We had no expectations of his recovery but he has got quite hearty again. Mr Sears has been sick with the prevailing fever but he is about again. We are

all well at present. The measles has been pretty much through every family except ours but I expect I shall have it for I am now at work where they have it.

It has been quite sickly amongst us this winter and considerable many deaths. Mr Sears has lost his daughter Amelia. She died about the first of December. I calculated about eight weeks ago that I should not live long and the doctor and all my neighbors thought the same but the doctor thinks at present that I stand a pretty good chance to get well of the dropsy. I have been very much complaining all summer with a pain in my bowels but did not know what ail'd me....The doctor found I had water in me and physics me severely....I was physiced for ten weeks severely and was reduced to almost a skeleton. I think I am gaining in my health.

We have been all sick this winter with the influenza but we have pretty much over it. We have had a sorrowful time. I took the influenza about the first of December and about three weeks after I felt quite well. I went to get wood and got my feet wet which has caused me to be laid up the remainder of the winter untill a few days ago. I was affraid it would be terminate in a consumption [tuberculosis] but I feel encouraged at present I will get well.

Death took a terrible toll on Seth and his family. Table II lists immediate family members who died within Seth's lifetime. He lost his paternal grandmother and mother at the age of five, and his only sister soon after his first marriage. In a thirteen year span, from 1822 to 1835, Seth endured the deaths of his second son, oldest daughter, first wife, half-sister, and second wife. In a number of letters, he wrote very emotionally about these deaths recounting the despair associated with losing a loved one:

I thought proper to inform you of the situation of myself and family. At the present we are in tolerable health but on the 12th of this instant we lost our youngest son James Hervey Williamson. He was taken sick on Sunday afternoon and died on Wednesday night just before day light. It is very sickly in this part of our country. There is a burying almost every day. Denton Mills has lost his youngest child. John Smith son of old Uncle Selah Smith in Setauket has lost a son and daughter and grandchild....Mr Sears daughter Polly Roe lies very low at present with the disentary. You can inform our friends of the death of our child.

A year after the death of Seth's young son, his daughter Jane Harriet died at the age of fifteen from the "quinzey," an acute inflammation of the soft palate around the tonsils, often leading to an abscess:

It is with an almost broken heart I communicate to you the situation of our family. My oldest daughter died yesterday about one o'clock and the funeral today at 12 o'clock. Her complaint has been a singular one. She was last winter sick a short time with a sore throat and the doct'r said it was the quinzey. She appear'd to have got well. But about three or four weeks ago she was taken with a sore throat again...It appear'd to brake inside and discharg'd a considerable out of her mouth....It seems an inflammation set in her throat and her throat mortified. The doct'r with his medicine appear'd to have cleans'd the throat of all the mortified flesh....She remain'd quite feeble until Wednesday the 16th. In the morning she was materially worse with grain in her bowels and great difficulty of breathing and died as above stated. She was a very promising girl which makes the stroke very heavy upon us.

Seth's mother, Charity Moubray, died at the age of

Table II

Family Deaths in Seth Williamson's Lifetime				
YEAR	SETH'S AGE			AGE AT DEATH
1787	5	Grandmother	Mary Osborn Williamson	?
1787	5	Mother	Charity Moubray Williamson	28
1800	18	Grandfather	John Williamson	?
1807	25	Sister	Amy Williamson	22
1822	40	Son	James Hervey Williamson	1
1823	41	Daughter	Jane Harriet Williamson	15
1825	43	Wife (1)	Catherine Stanbrough Williamson	41
1827	45	Half-sister	Deborah Williamson Wheeler	31
1835	53	Wife (2)	Julia Smith Williamson	50
1837	55	Father	Jedidiah Williamson	79
1842	60	Daughter	Lettyann Williamson Robinson	28
1847	65	Stepmother	Sophia Satterly Williamson	81
1857	75	Grandson	Edward Smith	3
1863	80	Seth Williamson dies		

twenty-eight from complications related to childbirth.¹² Seth was five and the surviving baby was John M. It appeared that Seth's first wife, Catherine Stanbrough, also died after giving birth, in this case to their son Harrison in 1825:

It is with a heavy heart and trembling hands I undertake to inform you of the heavy affliction I am under. My wife was buried at nine o'clock this morning. She has left an infant son five weeks and three days old. The mail is now waiting which obliges me to close without informing you of the particulars of her death. I wish you to inform father and all my friends of my heavy affliction.

Two years later, Seth received a letter from John M. telling of their half-sister's death at age thirty-one. In response, Seth remarked "it was no more than I expected to hear from what I had heard of her health before. It was quite a consolation to me to hear that she was resigned to her fate."

Beginning in 1830, Seth's second wife, Julia, endured a five-year battle with an apparent cancerous growth on her foot which eventually cost her her life:

My wife about 7 weeks ago had a small sore come on top of the right foot. I was fearful it was the arrisipus but her applying cooling things kept it from spreading and inflaming for some time. The doctor was sent for who pronounced it arrisipus which has been considerably advancing over the systems. At present it seems to confind to the foot the side of the right foot at the root of the little toe is the worst. The foot is very much inflamd up to the ankle. The doctor spoke quite encouraging yesterday respecting it but is so fearful she will loose her little toe....How long she may remain in this situation I cannot tell and what may be the consequence.

A week later, Seth wrote John M. again and solemnly mentioned, "I dont know that my wife is any better whether she will loose her life or foot I cant tell at present." Within a couple more weeks, a very worried Seth remarked to John M. that "the complaint seems to be running all over her. I dont expect she will walk any on her foot this winter if ever. I dont know hardly what to write. I dont think her out of danger by any means....I have employed two doctors. I am in haste....You must excuse me in not writing any more." A next letter, over a year later, talked about the "sorrowful time" due to "influenza" and briefly noted that "my wifes health is quite feeble." The apparent cancer took Julia's life in January 1835:

Providence hath deprived me of my companion. She was as well as usual last Christmas noon and eat dinner as well as common and in the afternoon was taken with a pain in her side and at dark laid down. Lettyann applyed warm things to her side but all to no purpose. The next day the doctor was cald and bled her and give her physic. But the complaint was very obstenate. Medicine did not operate as the doctor would wish. The fifth day after she was taken she appeared rather better but the typhus fever set in and she died....Theophilus Smith and Maria come from Milford the Sunday previous to her death and staid untill she was buried.

Seth closed this letter by dejectedly saying that his youngest son, Harrison, was in good health "but I must not think too much of him he may be taken away very sudden."

Seth's world was terribly disrupted before Julia's death but thereafter it headed rapidly into a downward spiral. John M. received four letters from Seth as well as three letters from family members that provided a vivid account of what happened to him in 1835. Theophilus Smith, Seth's son-in-law and son of Julia, penned a letter to John M. a week after his mother's death:

I am sorry to say to you that your brother is determined to pursue the drunkends course. Sometimes for weeks he will stay at home and keep sober but as soon as he gets where there is ardent spirits he looses all his fortitude and will stay at the tavern day after day.¹³

Twenty-one-year old Lettyann bitterly described the destitute situation of her father and their family soon after John M. had received Theophilus's letter:

We have not heard from you in some time...I own that it would be unpleasant for any of our friends to visit us and see the way papa conducts. You have no doubt heard that we do not keep house any more. He has a mind to not keep house any more as our family was small and I was willing I did not know but he might do better if he had no family to see to. But I am disappointed he does much worse than he even done before and spends a great deal....He spends all his time at the tavern and does not stay home at all....It appears to me that papa does not think that he has children and ought to save something for them....It hurt my feelings to see the property spent in the way it is....I should consider it a great favour to have the business taken out of his hands even if he is not willing. I think it can be done and the sooner the better....If you are willing...you will confer a great favour on his children.¹⁴

Later on in this letter to her uncle, Lettyann softened her tone and reasoned that “I should always want papa to have a comfortable living for I think he deserves it but he will soon be destitute of that if there is not something done.”¹⁵

Six months later in June 1835, Maria placed the situation in clear perspective in a letter to her “Estemee Uncle”:

When I think that my father was once a kind parent and affectionate husband and a good citizen but now he is changed. For several years he had drunked to escaps after indulging in that evil habit all his life. My pen cannot describe how wecked he is in this world. He has now no home. He stays at the tavern the most of the time. He hurts his children....But he is my father and your brother and I know we are all his friends.

She continued on:

I do not know what will come of him and I do not think he is capable of managing the affairs of a family but Lettyann is willing to go home and take care of him....Mr Smith [Theophilus] says that he will assist you in securing the property if you will come here. I hope you will not fail for there is great need that it should be done.¹⁶

John M. acted quickly on the wishes of his nieces. On 5 August, he and Theophilus placed all of Seth’s real and personal property in a trust for the purpose of paying creditors and conserving money for Seth’s living expenses.¹⁷ Eleven days later, Seth responded, voicing reluctance to such an agreement:

Your request and those of my friends on the Island were that I should appoint some persons to settle up my business....I never would agree to put my property out of my hand on the principal you wanted me to do. The reason of my appointing you because you was the greatest creditor.

However, further on in the same letter, Seth faced the reality of the situation.

I am in hopes after paying my debts there will be nearly two thousand dollars left which I wish secured by land and mortgage and the interest taken for my support....I am in hopes to regain my health so that I can earn something towards supporting myself....My health is quite feeble but I think I am gaining.

In early October, Seth and Theophilus found a buyer for his property which included land and buildings:

There has been in Milford to day a Mr Conklin and wishes to purchase the property. He offers 3000

dollars for both places. Mr Sears has offered 2800. Mr Phinehas Hulse says he would do better than Mr Sears offered but he did not say how much better....We promised Mr Conklin if we cant get any more than 3000 dollars he shall have the refusal. He says he will pay \$1000 down and the remainder next spring when we give him possession.

At the end of the month, Seth described to John M. the bidding and negotiations of the sale. Sears and Hulse were property owners adjoining Seth’s land of over one hundred acres:

Mr Conklin met us in Scotchtown....We put up at Mr Sears....Smith went to see Mr Hulse. We thought we would give the neighbors a fair chance. Mr Sears said he would give no more than \$2800. I told Smith he must bargain with Conklin or Hulse and I would stand back. One was enough to bargain. Smith know my mind. I told him I should be satisfied with \$3000 but get more if he could. Mr Hulse bid \$3100, Mr Conklin \$3150. Smith come to me and told me Conklings bid. I advisd him to not let Conkling go and in about 20 minutes Mr Conkling come up to \$3200 which was the price Smith had let on it in the morning but I did not think he would get it. We went from Mr Sears to Scotchtown.... Jacob Mills Junr drew the Article. My friends in Orange County that is acquainted with the farm thinks we have made a good sale.



Figure 1. Seth Williamson’s gravestone.

With the help of Conkling's down payment of \$1,000, Seth reported to John M., "We paid of the most of the debts in Orange County. We shall have to go over between this and winter when we calculate to settle all the debts in Orange County." The liquidation of assets and settlement of all debts was completed in May 1836. The remaining balance in the trust was \$1,900, a shade under Seth's original hopes. The provisions of the trust specified it was to provide a comfortable support for Seth and support and education for Harrison for a period of two years. Interestingly, the principal of the trust remained intact for the rest of Seth's life, almost thirty years.¹⁸

Seth's crisis had come to a head in early summer of 1835, but by August his life seemed to have taken a change for the better when he wrote his brother that "I can inform you that I am in Milford living with Theophilus H. Smith....I think a very fine man and I expect to spend my days with him and Maria." Seth failed to mention that the move reunited him with his ten-year-old son, Harrison, who had been living with his sister and brother-in-law.¹⁹ The second-to-last surviving letter between the brothers, dated 9 October 1835, contained undoubtedly welcome news to John M.

We are all well here in Milford. I long to see you all. My health has improv'd very much since I have been in Milford. I work every day. I have fram'd a small barn for Theophilus 16 by 20 all alone by the square rule not any put together untill raised complete joints.

The last letter was written 26 October 1835, leaving little known of Seth thereafter other than that he resided with Maria and Theophilus for the remaining twenty-eight years of his life.²⁰ The three are buried together in Milford Cemetery (Figure 1), Seth next to his beloved daughter.²¹

Notes

1. Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 62.
2. Edward B. Fix, unpublished genealogy material on Seth Williamson.
3. Seth Williamson Letters, 1810-1835. Collection of the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, N.Y.
4. For more information on Jedidiah Williamson, see Edward B. Fix, "A Long Island Carpenter at Work: A quantitative Inquiry into the Account Book of Jedidiah Williamson," *The Chronicle* 32 no. 4 (1979): 61-63 and 33 no. 1 (1980): 4-8.

5. Edward B. Fix, "Jedidiah Williamson: The Man, His Family, His Work, and His Barn," unpublished manuscript, Suffolk County Historical Society, Riverhead, N.Y., 1978.
6. U.S. Federal Census, Suffolk County, N.Y., 1860 and 1870.
7. Deed: Office of the County Clerk, Goshen, Orange Co., N.Y., Liber T-23.
8. Fix, "Jedidiah Williamson: The Man."
9. Jedidiah Williamson Account Book, 1788-1834. Collection of the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, N.Y.
10. Edward B. Fix, "Jedidiah Williamson: A Biographical Profile of the Stony Brook Farmer-Carpenter," *Long Island Forum* (March 1979), 52-57.
11. Lockridge, 157.
12. Fix, "Jedidiah Williamson: The Man."
13. Theophilus Smith, letter to John M. Williamson, 15 January 1835. Collection of the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, N.Y.
14. Lettyann Williamson, letter to John M. Williamson, 22 June 1835. Collection of the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, N.Y.
15. Lettyann Williamson letter to John M. Williamson, 22 June 1835.
16. Maria Williamson Smith letter to John M. Williamson, 8 July 1835. Collection of the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook, N.Y.
17. Deed: Office of the County Clerk, Goshen, Orange Co., N.Y., Liber 53-351.
18. Deed: Office of the County Clerk, Milford, Pike County, Pa., Liber 12-347.
19. Lettyann Williamson letter to John M. Williamson, 22 June 1835.
20. U.S. Federal Census, Pike County, Pa., 1840, 1860.
21. Milford Cemetery Headstones, Milford, Pa.

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Author

Edward B. Fix is a fourth-generation co-owner of his family's jewelry business in Spokane, Washington, which began in 1887. Prior to this, he was involved in historic building restoration on the East coast. His twenty-year-old son is named after Jedidiah Williamson, Seth's father.



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