

William F. Johnson (1838-1926), long-time missionary, author and translator of Indian writings as well as president of Biddle College (now Johnson C. Smith University) in Charlotte, North Carolina was raised in Steubenville, Ohio by relatives; later his home church in Steubenville commissioned him to be a Presbyterian missionary.

Rachel Lillie Kerr, who married William Johnson, attended Female Seminary in Steubenville prior to 1860.

This paper contains a biographical sketch of their lives which was researched using family papers, vintage books, and documents such as U. S Census. A bibliography is attached plus 1913 photographs of William and two of their daughters.

Also included is an outline of the Johnson family from the first ancestor to arrive in America.

William Johnson (1838- 1926)

William F. "Will" Johnson was born in Cadiz, Ohio on March 16, 1838, just a few weeks before the coronation of Queen Victoria in Britain. In America, 1838 was the year that Kentucky passed a law allowing women to attend public school. It was in this year that the *Times of India*, a newspaper in the English language was founded. Little could William's parents, William and Elizabeth Orr Johnson, foresee how the lives of their sons, William and Albert, would be affected by those seemingly unrelated events. Before both men were twenty-five years old, their destiny had been affected by the policies of Queen Victoria's government towards India, and the growing conviction in America that all people have a right to equality and education.

When the Johnsons arrived in Cadiz, Ohio, seat of Harrison County, it had several churches and about twenty stores. We know that in the early part of the century several families around Cadiz had Underground Railroad stations, enabling slaves to reach freedom in Canada. It was a good place to raise a family. But before Will reached age three, both of his parents died leaving six orphaned children. Relatives living in various cities took the children into their home. Will was sent to live with his Uncle David and Aunt Jane on a farm outside of **Steubenville, Ohio**. He lived there until he entered Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. Though William and his brother Albert

(raised in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania) were separated during childhood by, they remained close. They both attended Jefferson College and Will later enrolled at Western Theological Seminary where Albert had attended.

After graduation Will became a schoolteacher in Hookstown, Beaver County, Pennsylvania. In Hookstown, William taught a few sessions at the Hookstown Academy and joined the Hookstown Presbyterian Church. He met Rachel Kerr who was also a teacher. **Rachel attended the Female Seminary at Steubenville** and was a well-educated woman for that time, Rachel taught at the Hookstown Select School on Washington Road.

Rachel was raised in a large family with four siblings: Jane, Samuel, Frank (m. Susan Nelson), Stella (m. John Langfitt). She was surrounded by a clan of close-knit relatives who had settled in the Hookstown, Pennsylvania area. Her Grandfather Kerr had a farm on Sevier Creek. And her other grandparents, Samuel and Mary Swaney, had a farm a few miles away on Mill Creek. Rachel's father David Kerr and Mary Swaney had grown up near each other and after they married, lived at the corner of Mill and Washington in Hookstown. David built many brick structures in Beaver County. The Kerrs, like William, attended the Presbyterian Church.

Rachel Lillie Kerr, born in February, 1837, grew up in the security and affection of many people. She grew to admire and love the young teacher who attended her church. They may have thought about a future of teaching school together. But Albert's death caused William to do some re-thinking of his life. He entered Western Theological Seminary in and when he graduated in 1860, **he was ordained as pastor and commissioned as a missionary by the Presbytery of Steubenville, Ohio**, his home church. He was appointed to the North India Mission.

Rachel married Will on June 5, 1860 aware now that they would be starting their own home far from her beloved Hookstown. It is because of her close relationship to family that we have many letters written back home by Rachel. Her descendant, Barbara Mitchell Tull, has compiled the letters, along with pictures, into a book *Affectionately Rachel: Letters from India 1860-1884*.

In less than two months after the wedding, the Hookstown Presbyterian Church hosted a farewell gathering at which there were "seen many tears and emotions". Before sailing, the young couple visited William's sister Margaret (Mrs. August) Blakesley. Then on July 28, 1860 they boarded the *Art Union* bound for Calcutta. They were less than 24 years old. Just three years earlier, Albert and Amanda Johnson (William's brother) had been killed in the 1857 Sepoy Uprising, so William and Amanda knew some—if not the full extent—of the cruelty and hatred against "Europeans" that had seethed for years in India. It was a time of uncertainty in their home country, too. There were rumors of civil

war. Rachel's brothers were of an age to be Union Army soldiers if war were declared. And it was not certain whether England, which controlled much of India, would support the northern states or the southern.

On December 8, 1860—almost five months since they had embarked at Boston-- after surviving seasickness and typhoons at sea, the Johnsons finally landed at Calcutta, India. It would be ten more days of travel by a pony cart, which changed horses every four miles, along the Grand Trunk Road before they reached the first home of their married life. It must have been a joy after the almost five months of traveling to arrive at the home of Mr and Mrs J. Johnston Walsh. The Walshes had been friends with Albert and Amanda. Mr Walsh wrote one of the first biographies recounting the capture and execution of eight American missionaries, including Amanda and Albert Johnson. The Walshes hosted the newcomers in pleasant surroundings high above the Ganges River. There were English-speaking neighbors to welcome and help William and Rachel gradually get used to life in a foreign country..

William expected an assignment to Futtegurh, the town where Albert had worked and where William and Rachel hoped to continue that ministry. Instead they were sent to Allahabad. It was quite a disappointment, but later Rachel decided that Allahabad had been the best place to learn language and become accustomed to the culture of India. But after only five months in Allahabad, Will and Rachel were on the move again-- sent to live in Futtegurh. So they packed up their belongings that had been shipped from the United States including books, mantel clock and an easy chair. Sending these items ahead to their new house, they boarded a train for the three-hour ride to the mission compound where they assumed their house would be ready. It wasn't.

Rachel wrote to her mother to describe the house with its verandah on all sides and its Indian features such as the *punka*, big fans in each room that were attached to a rope that a servant, sitting outside on the verandah, rhythmically pulled to keep air circulating in the house. Oppressive heat made it impossible to open windows except in the early morning or late evening hours.

WORKING FOR FREEDOM —IN INDIA AND AMERICA

The last prayers of Amanda and Albert before they were captured in 1857 were that God would send others to take their place. Now those prayers were being answered. William and Rachel were by all accounts committed to serving the Indian people and sharing the message of a God who loves all people equally. They had not just come out of some sense of guilt or obligation to carry on what someone else had started. They diligently studied the language, eager to be able to share that salvation and eternal life is a free gift; and can't be earned by payment to priests, by pilgrimages, or trying to earn

a higher caste in a next life. They wanted to tell Indians about Jesus who was willing to die for all mankind so that all who believed in Him could be reconciled to a Holy God. William learned to use a magic lantern show and illustrate stories of Jesus' life of kindness, compassion, gentleness and justice for all. They did not just teach a religion but—though imperfect humans—they lived this message.

It was their faith that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone which motivated Albert and William and their wives to leave a comfortable successful future in the United States and face the inconvenience of months of sea travel. It motivated them to invest months in learning a language, knowing full well that many would not even listen and others would refuse to accept their message. Some would even misinterpret their acts of kindness. Like other missionaries in India, they did what they could to loosen the bondage of the caste system which was a part of the Hindu religious system. Hindus believed that the gods had ordained that each person be confined to a certain prescribed area of thinking and way of life. And as sometimes happens in all religions or governments, the people holding power and wealth because of their high caste, fought against anything that might make people believe that in this present life they could break free of the bondage of caste and the near-slavery of women.

Rachel's letters to family back home included stories about the barriers to their efforts to help people or share the Gospel with them. William reported that in one village he met a group of Indians who admitted that they no longer had faith in Hinduism.

They listened to the stories of Christ and believed them, but they were not willing to endure the persecution and loss of caste which a public profession of faith in the Christian gospel would bring.

He told about a young man attending their school who wanted to talk about religion. The student admitted that he did not really believe in Hinduism. He did not believe that the caste system was a just system. He believed that the words about Jesus Christ were just and true. But his family was already persecuting him because he did not observe the Hindu rites. He dared not forsake his cultural religion entirely. Even when Indians revealed that they thought praying to multiple idols was folly, they hesitated to go against their culture. When one man dared to be baptized, he lost his job. His wife's family felt so disgraced that they promised her money only if she would promise to never forsake idolatry.

The effort to educate girls also had obstacles. Muslims and Hindus alike did not think that education for girls was appropriate. Girls should not attend classes with boys. So missionaries organized reading glasses and invited the ragged girls who were in the local market area. Rachel wrote: girls who want to learn, learn quickly. But they are often married off before age thirteen and make no progress in their learning.

When smallpox broke out, the natives refused to accept vaccination because they did not want to offend their goddess, Seetha. The Brahman priests told them that letting their children be vaccinated would bring punishment from Seetha. Many Indians died from small pox each year.

Rachel, who would lose two young children of her own to death, grieved for a child in their school who went missing. When his body was discovered, all the silver arm bands and other jewelry stolen his mother had proudly placed on him had been stolen. Mothers customarily loaded their children with decorative jewelry, sometimes expensive; and too often robbers killed their children.

Back in America, Rachel's brothers were fighting for the Union because they believed that America needed to end the slavery of human beings. They believed it was evil for people to think that they were superior to people of another race or skin color. At the Presbyterian Church in Hookstown, Pennsylvania, Pastor Ormond raised a company of men to serve in the Union Army. Even Rachel's father was part of a home guard unit.

Rachel's family had been concerned for her safety far off in a strange land where hostility to Europeans and Americans had so recently broken out in murder, pillage and cruelty to women and children. Now Rachel reminded her family that their own safety, due to the war in America, might be more threatened than hers was in India. They were aware of the parallel between her brothers in America fighting and risking their lives and homes to free African-Americans from slavery and Rachel and William's risking life and health-- perhaps the life and welfare of their children-- to peacefully share the Bible's message that all people are equally loved and valuable. To preach that all have sinned, no matter their race or position in society and all need forgiveness, which God offers.

Albert and Amanda had given their lives to help others know this freedom. Rachel and William did not give up physical life but they gave up much of what we call "a good life". Their commitment to India meant many "deaths" of dreams, comfort and home. They experienced the physical death of dear children. In one letter to her mother Rachel tells about the sickness of the little son who they thought would recover from his illness, but instead they watched him as he faded away. That sacrifice is poignantly expressed in the young mother's letter to her parents revealing she had not ever been able to get a photograph made of their son. Her only keepsake was a lock of hair, part of which she was sending to the grandparents who would never meet or even know what that grandson looked like.

Though there was heartbreak and homesickness, Rachel's letters were positive. She often spoke of the interesting plants, fruits and architecture. She was curious to learn about Indian foods and culture. She wrote of enjoying a little area in the grove of mango trees where she liked to read. She even wrote with humor about the giant roaches, the

white ants that nibbled at her leather-bound books and the lizards that had to be tolerated in every part of the house because they ate the flies. As furlough time approached after twelve years of life in India, Rachel was sad to leave the people and work she had invested in.

At the same time she was excited to see family once more. She longed to see her grandfather who was in ill health but hoping to live just long enough to see her one more time. He died a few days before they arrived.

When it was time to return to India, Rachel and William decided that for the education and health of the oldest children, they would leave them in America with relatives. They did not see those children again for ten years. In the book *Affectionately, Rachel* we find samples of the letters that Rachel and William wrote to their children. It was a sacrifice to part with children. And more so for William who knew what it was to be raised without birth-parents. And Rachel recalled how siblings and parents had daily surrounded her own youth. In spite of this long separation, the children must have felt the love and sincerity in their parents' decision because three returned to India as missionaries and a fourth was planning to return when he died a few days before his wedding.

In 1884, William and Rachel took another furlough. This time they felt that they needed to stay with their children. They resigned from the mission board and Will enrolled as a doctoral student at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh. Both he and Rachel were busy speaking to missionary groups and churches hoping to encourage others to go and help meet the great needs in India. They planned to return when her health was improved.

YEARS IN NORTH CAROLINA

William was invited to become president of Biddle University, in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Catawba Presbytery had established Biddle University (now Johnson C. Smith University) just two years after the Civil War. Mary Biddle donated a large sum and another person donated the land to provide a liberal arts education for black men in the South. Other schools existed for black men, but they focused on agricultural and practical skills; Biddle would provide a liberal arts education for pastors and teachers who would become leaders in the new South. Scotia Seminary was a corresponding women's school. As the third president of Biddle University, William served from 1886-1891. He became a spokesman and advocate for education of African-Americans. He tried to increase scholarship funds so that more students could attend. He made plans to build a dormitory and hired African-American professors. According to Rachel's letters, she enjoyed their life and fellowship with the students and professors.

After a five-year term, William graciously smoothed the transition from white administrators to installation of the first black president.



Biddell University Campus. Source: Wikipedia

BACK TO INDIA

In 1886 William and Rachel's eldest daughter Mary accepted a teaching position and settled into life at Claysville, Pennsylvania. In 1887 Will received a letter addressed to W. F. Johnson, DD (Doctor of Divinity) from his mission board asking him to return to India and take the position of director and professor at the Saharanpur Theological School in India. The letter urged that while the position at Biddell University was important there were other men who could fill that position; but no one was as well-qualified to lead the school in Saharanpur, near Agra, India. The board was confident that Rachel would be a wonderful mentor for the student's wives. This decision to return to India was delayed when in early 1888, Rachel was in a horse and buggy accident. She died July 18, 1888.

In 1890, William's son Ed --who had been planning to accompany his father back to India with his new bride—died of typhoid fever just before the wedding. The family grieved again.

William, having transferred leadership at Biddell to a new president, moved to Wooster, Ohio where people helped him to set up housekeeping. He had children still at home. Daughter Jennie graduated from Washington Seminary in 1891. She and her husband enrolled at Wooster College. Jennie took the place of mother and housekeeper for the

two youngest children. And Will prepared to return to India as director, professor and author at the theological school. Mary accompanied her father and was his secretary and personal assistant for thirty-five years.

William remained in India from 1891 until his death in 1926. He was eighty-eight and had lived almost 60 years in India. His ashes are buried in Landour, India in the lovely hills that he, Rachel, and the children visited when the summer heat was too unhealthy in Futteghurh.

William won the respect of his colleagues for his hard work. The natives loved him because of his kind, humble spirit. When on furlough in the states he was a well-received representative of missions, traveling from Pennsylvania to as far as Dakota. In his mid-40s' he went back to school and earned his doctorate and was qualified to serve as a university president. He authored about 400 books or papers, including teaching materials in the Indian language. He translated some Indian literature into English. He published articles in Indian journals and edited a Christian journal. Skilled in languages, he taught Hindustani to new American missionaries. He taught English to Indian students. Along with Rachel he helped with the orphans and new believers in Futteghurh.

The last recorded prayers of Albert and Amanda Gill Johnson before they were captured and murdered in the Sepoy uprising, was that might be like a seed from which a plant would grow. A plant producing many more people to teach the Bible and work for liberty. God answered that prayer.

Many years after William arrived in India someone asked,

"What brought you to India?"

He answered, "A grave."

CHILDREN OF WILLIAM AND RACHEL KERR JOHNSON

WILLIAM (1863-64) born and died in India

MARY E. JOHNSON (1864-1936)

Mary never married. She taught school and then served as missionary and her father's secretary/companion in India for thirty-five years. After her father's death she returned to America and died in 1936.

EDWIN K. Johnson (1865-1890)

He and his fiancé were planning to return to India as missionaries. He died just before his wedding.

ALBERT (1869-69) born and died in India

JANE REX "**JENNIE**" JOHNSON (b 10 Aug 1870, Landour India; d 6 Feb 1951, Wooster, Ohio)

She married William Thomas Mitchell (b. 22 Apr 1870, Ohio; d 1 My 1933, Wooster Ohio). They had 3 children.

FREDERICK JOHNSON (1879-)

Dora Elizabeth "**Bessie**" Johnson (1881-)

FRANKLIN ORR JOHNSON (20 Oct 1883, Hookstown, PA)

He married Annette Morrison Thackwell (b 27 Jly 1897, Wooster, Ohio). Frank graduated from Wooster College and McCormick Seminary. Frank and Annette spent seven years as missionaries in the Punjab, India. Ill-health returned them to America where Frank was a pastor in the Pittsburgh area. They had 2 children:

1) Katherine Ruth (b 1897 in India) m. to Alan Lockhart Fulton

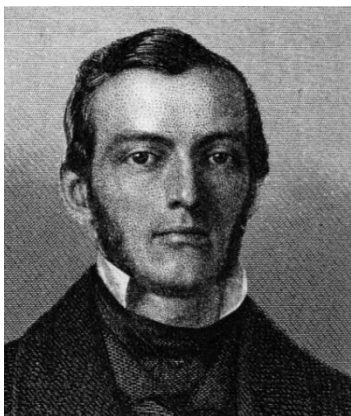
2) Philip Thackwell Johnson (b. 30 Nov 1900 in India; d. 19 My 1951, Philadelphia) had 4 children.

If you are reading this and can add more information to the descendants of William and Rachel Ker Johnson, please contact me at vnuky14@gmail.com. I am a distant relative, by marriage, to Richard Johnson, who is a brother to William and Albert. Thank you.

WILLIAM ATTENDS a MEMORIAL for VICTIMS OF THE 1857 UPRISING

William F. Johnson was in India when the cornerstone of the Memorial Church to honor the martyrs of the Sepoy uprising was laid. A special train was provided by the British government with free tickets for those who had a relationship to anyone murdered. When William and missionaries who accompanied him arrived at Cawnpore, they entered a special carriage sent to carry them to a grand feast. William went to visit the well where the insurgents threw the bodies of women and children. He saw the beautiful monument of an angel of peace over the well. Before the ceremony he strolled around to see the place where so many were killed. He walked out on to the plain to see a large stone cross with two smaller crosses marking the site where bodies were thrown after the well could hold no more. He looked at the other well used to draw water by the besieged and noted the cannon balls that had struck it. A large crowd of Europeans and natives came to witness the laying of the first stone with a silver trowel. Psalm 118 was chanted and after a benedictory prayer, William returned with the other specially invited guests to "tea" and then they were on the train headed for home.

On another day Rachel and William walked over the old Mission Compound where Albert and Amanda had lived outside of Futtegurh. They saw the ruined wall of the church, the mission house, and houses of native Christians who were also martyred in the 1857 uprising. His brother Albert and his wife Amanda were not yet twenty-four years old and had been in India only 2 years when they were murdered.



Albert Osborne Johnson



Amanda Joanna Gill Johnson

William F. Johnson with some of his family about 1912.



Clockwise: Jennie Johnson Mitchell, W T Mitchell, Mitchell's daughter, Mary Johnson, William F. Johnson, Mitchell's son



Postcard from William Johnson c. 1900 "Hindu Woman at Prayers"

Pictures of Albert and Amanda Johnson from Vivian Heidbreder.
Pictures of William F. Johnson are from collection of Ruby Dappert Watkins,
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Note: Many internet websites were gleaned for historical facts or photos of places related to these biographies; I have not listed each site because the reader can easily google the city and institution websites.

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WILLIAM JOHNSTON/JOHNSON LINE IN AMERICA

John Johnston (1) and his wife Elizabeth (2) left Scotland and moved to Ireland due to religious persecution of the Covenanters (Presbyterian) under James II. Later, from Ireland, they sailed to America with their six children.

In Beers, Commemorative and Biographical Record of Washington County, Pennsylvania it states that John (1) and Elizabeth (2) Johnston of County Down, Ireland and their children- William, Esther, Jane, Margaret, Elizabeth, and **Richard** (3) sailed for America in 1772. Several genealogies assume that John and Elizabeth died during that sea voyage. The children began their life in the New World in Delaware/Maryland and then in 1791 moved to Washington County, Pennsylvania

Richard Johnston/Johnson (3) was born in County Down, Ireland in 1761-3. He married Jane (Jenny) Bradford (4), the daughter of James and Elizabeth (nee Gibson) Bradford on August 23, 1796 in America.

Richard was an elder in the Chartiers Presbyterian Church. His occupation was farming. He was living in North Strabane Township, Washington, Pennsylvania before 1800. Richard died in Washington County, Pennsylvania, 1836.

Children of Richard (3) and Jane Bradford Johnson (4):

Mary

James

William (5)

Elizabeth (Elizabeth lived at Cross Creek. M. George Gladden, they took Albert O Johnson when Albert's parents died.)

John (lived on his father's place and farmed. He had a son, Richard V, a surveyor);

Thomas (a physician)

Jane

David

George

Nancy

The son of Richard (3) and Jane (Jenny) Bradford (4) Johnson who is in our line is **William Johnson** (5).

William was born in America on May 3, 1802 in Washington Co. Pennsylvania.

He studied medicine at Jefferson College in Canonsburg, PA. He received a Doctor Certificate in the Art of Medicine, 1826. He was a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church. He married Elizabeth Orr (6), daughter of James and Margaret Hawkins Orr on May 10, 1826. Her parents were in Washington, Pennsylvania before 1800; their ancestors were from Scotland.

Her father was a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church. William and Elizabeth first lived in Greensburg, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania where they lived just a short time before moving to Cadiz, Ohio.

CHILDREN OF WILLIAM (5) AND ELIZABETH ORR JOHNSON:

James

Margaret

Albert (7)

Junius

Richard (8)

William F (Will) (9)

William (5) died December 22, 1837/8 in Cadiz, Ohio at age 36, leaving his wife, Elizabeth, with children who were ages nine months to eleven years.

His tombstone is now in a memorial park in Cadiz where early settlers' tombstones were relocated.

Elizabeth returned to Washington County, Pennsylvania and tried to support the family by running a millinery shop. She died--some say of a broken heart—three years later in 1840. The children were divided among various relatives and did not grow up together, though the siblings William (9), Albert, and Margaret kept in touch over the years.

RICHARD JOHNSON (8) son of William (5) and Elizabeth Orr Johnson

An article from Portrait and Biographical Records Christian County, 1893 described Richard Johnson as one of the influential farmers of Johnson Township, his home being on section 14. He was born May 14, 1830 in Cadiz, Ohio. His parents, William (5) and Elizabeth Johnson (6), died when he was a small boy. After his mother died, Richard and his siblings were separated and raised by relatives. Over the years, their lives were scattered from Kentucky, Connecticut, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania and the country of India.

At one time Richard lived with a Bradford family. One biographical sketch says that "he early had to earn his way" and worked in a tannery for six years. He left the Bradford family. He then worked for and/or boarded with Henry Baker. He married Henry's daughter, Matilda Baker, on October 11, 1859/60 in Taylorville, Illinois.

Matilda's parents, Henry and Mary Klienfelter Baker, were of Scotts-Irish ancestry. They had been natives of Washington County, Pennsylvania, but moved to Christian County, Illinois in 1854 when it still seemed like wilderness.

Richard and Matilda farmed on Baker land. They made bricks and built a house, where they lived their remaining lives. The house was still in use in the 1940s . (Archie and Agnes Hawkins lived there.) . By 1900 they had 470 acres of farm land. He was a Republican having cast his first vote for Winfield Scott. He was one of the school directors in Christian County, Illinois. Richard was a well-respected man in Illinois but apparently all that his sibling back east knew about him was that he "ran away west" when he was a teenager. Tull's *Affectionately Rachel* about Rachel and William (5) Johnson includes Richard's name but has no other biographical information about him. The author mentions in a footnote near the end of her book:

*William's sister Maggie Blakesley, of Waterbury, Connecticut died in July 1885 following an illness that left her paralyzed. In 1900, William (Will), now age sixty-two, concluded a life-time effort to locate his last surviving sibling, Richard. Richard had run away from the western Pennsylvania family enclave as a youth. Will found Richard living on a farm in Pana, Christian County, Illinois. Will traveled to Pana for a brief visit. The brothers had a joyous final reunion. It had been over fifty years since they had seen each other. (Tull, *Affectionately Rachel*)*

Richard died in 1903 and was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery, Taylorville, Illinois. At his death, he owned 600 acres of land and was able to give his daughters each a good farm. Matthew owned the homeplace. Matilda Baker Johnson died February 6, 1912 ,buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.

