

Williams, William Sherley [1]

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3 Jan. 1787–14 Mar. 1849

William Sherley Williams, trapper and guide better known as Bill or Old Bill Williams, was born on a farm on Horse Creek in Rutherford (now Polk [2]) County, the fourth of nine children of Joseph and Sarah Musick Williams. His family was of Welsh origin on both sides. His mother was of a Virginia family that had migrated to Rutherford County [3]; his father was born in North Carolina and served for seven years in the Continental army. They married in Rutherford County in 1777 and after the war received a grant of 274 acres on Horse Creek. They sold this in 1794 and moved westward to the vicinity of St. Louis, where they again took up farming.

At age seventeen, following some schooling, Williams became a traveling Baptist [4] minister among the frontier settlements. After seven years he realized that this was not his calling and turned to trapping; at that time St. Louis was the hub of the U.S. fur trade [5]. Settling among the Osage Indians, he hunted and trapped the year round. In 1825–26 he was a member of a surveying [6] party that marked the greater part of the Santa Fe Trail. [7] For the remainder of his life he was one of the ablest of the "mountain men," that hardy and colorful group that hunted and trapped in the West prior to 1850 and that often guided expeditions through wild and unexplored territory. Williams was on good terms with several Indian tribes and spoke their languages. His trapping and guide work took him to virtually every state west of Missouri; surveying and exploration groups sought out his services due to his expert knowledge of the climate and terrain.

In 1833–34 he was a member of the California expedition led by Joseph R. Walker; in 1841 and 1843 he was with parties exploring the Northwest and New Mexico. In 1848 he joined the fourth western expedition of John Charles Fremont as a guide. Mountain snowstorms slowed the party and led to eleven deaths; the group finally gave up and returned to Taos, N.Mex. Fremont blamed Williams for the disaster, rather unjustly in the view of most mountain historians. Several weeks afterwards Williams and another survivor, Dr. Benjamin Kern, returned to this trail in hopes of salvaging some lost medical equipment. They were attacked and killed by a band of Ute Indians.

Williams was probably the roughest, bravest, and most eccentric of all the mountain men, whose ranks included such vivid personalities as Kit Carson, Jed Smith, and Lucien Fontenelle. Zebulon Pike, for whom Pike's Peak is named, described him as "about six-feet-one, gaunt, red-headed, with a hard weatherbeaten face, marked deeply with small-pox. . . . a shrewd, acute, original man, and far from illiterate. . . . the bravest and most fearless mountaineer of them all." His reckless sprees of fighting and drinking in the forts and trading posts of the time became legendary; still, his real love was the untracked solitude of the mountain West. Though reckless at times, he was a skilled trader at the fur posts and an accomplished negotiator with the Indians.

He is believed to have married, around 1813, an Osage woman by whom he had two daughters, and to have been buried by the Indians who killed him near the Del Norte River in lower Colorado. His name is perpetuated in Bill Williams Mountain, Bill Williams Fork of the Colorado River, and probably the town of Williams, all in Arizona, as well as the Williams River, in Middle Park, Colo., and the nearby Williams River Mountains.

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